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CHAPTER 10:

A holistic, continuous approach to NWU students' academic acculturation: The role of Academic Literacy and the Writing Centre

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Abstract

In this chapter we focus on the development of discipline-specific academic literacies with a sustainable approach towards developing crucial skills beyond the current first-year support. We perceive this challenge as one experienced across South Africa, especially regarding the various levels of academic literacy capabilities of students entering Higher Education (HE). In the chapter, we will, therefore, respond to the issue posed from the perspectives of the support entities, Academic Literacy and the Writing Centre, which work with the various disciplines at the North-West University (NWU).

The chapter first offers an overview of academic literacy in South Africa, followed by a consideration of relevant literature used to develop a (suggested) rudimentary framework for a balanced response to the development of academic literacies. We argue from the perspectives of Academic Literacy and the Writing Centre, whilst focussing on the relevance of what we do and how we tap into the various disciplines to assist NWU students in their academic acculturation and in the acquisition of the necessary skills to write in their disciplines and across disciplines. While doing *so, we shed light on the vital connection between the Writing Centre, Academic Literacy, and the disciplines we support. In addition, we highlight our current roles in the University, where we find ourselves in a space that provides academic writing support to students from various disciplines. The interwovenness of support structures is highlighted, as this leads to the points of discussion regarding responses to the importance of academic literacy support in the continuous academic acculturation of HE students.*

Keywords: Academic Literacy, Writing Centre, Disciplinary-Specific, Academic Writing Development, Academic Acculturation

Introduction

When joining a programme in Higher Education Institutions (HEI), students become practising members of an academic community through academic acculturation. The process of academic acculturation can be described in various ways. Still pertinent is the argument made by Van de Poel and Brunfaut (2004), that students need to become members of the academic community through integration or some form of induction. The latter is achieved by acquiring the norms and practices of the academic culture, i.e., becoming "academically literate" (Van de Poel & Brunfaut, 2004, p. 330). This observation can be seen as an augmentation of Hyland's (2009) statement that students must interact with their community through prevailing academic discourse. The topic of student academic acculturation, from the points of view of successful acculturation or a failure to truly acculturate to the HEI environment, has been discussed at length (both locally and internationally), and researchers agree that the process of academic acculturation is problematic (Bharuthram, 2012; Brinkworth et al., 2009; Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003; Emerson et al., 2015; Leki, 2006; Scott, 2009;

Van Dyk & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2012; Van Dyk et al., 2013; Van Schalkwyk, 2008; Weideman, 2003).

Students' inability to successfully acculturate to the HEI community, that is, their failure to engage successfully in academic discourse, could lead to a failure to graduate (either resulting in a termination of studies or an extension of time needed to complete a degree). According to the Council on Higher Education [CHE] (2010), 41% of all students enrolled for a three-year degree dropped out before completing their degree. Both Scott et al. (2007) and Scott (2009) confirm these statistics and add to the worrying evidence that 44% of undergraduate students registered for a three-year degree only graduate after five years of study. In an attempt to counter the high dropout rates, many HEI have established interventions (support services and academic development programmes) that address the needs of 'underprepared students' (Alexander et al., 2005; CHE, 2013; Cliff, 2015; McKenna, 2003; Van Dyk et al., 2013).

Van Schalkwyk (2008) states that despite various initiatives to improve the HEI throughput rates, dropout rates continue to rise. The high dropout rates can be attributed to academic illiteracy: that is, students' inability to acculturate to the HEI community, or in layman's terms, students' inability to read and write critically and analytically, to discriminate between fact and opinion, to recognise what is deemed evidence for an argument and to grasp the discourse of the discipline (De Klerk et al., 2006; Van Dyk et al., 2013).

An appropriate approach to address the issue of inadequate academic literacy levels in Higher Education students has yet to be determined. Despite the various initiatives and interventions put in place by the various HEI in

South Africa (including support services and academic development programmes), many students still fail to acculturate to their "new" environment. Against this background, three questions need to be asked: (1) what else should we be doing to support students; (2) how can we improve the various approaches/services/support structures to address the dire situation in South African HE, where students are struggling to complete their degrees; and, (3) what strategies can we develop to create awareness of academic writing development support interventions? To address this problem, we will present a brief overview of academic literacy in South Africa, with a specific focus on the NWU context. This is followed by a short overview of the relevant literature used to develop a rudimentary framework for a balanced response to the development of academic literacies. After that, we will provide a brief overview of NWU Writing Centre (WrCr) theory and praxis. After framing our current academic literacies development context, we will sketch the current initiatives and interventions at the NWU in order to propose a revised approach to assist in students' academic acculturation and the development of crucial academic writing skills in HE. The importance of the development of an improved strategy to create awareness of NWU writing support interventions, through which the various functions of said interventions are highlighted and explained to all stakeholders, is also explained.

Although we broach the issues to be discussed from the perspective of the North-West University, we firmly believe that our revised approach might be incorporated in HEIs across SA to improve the academic literacy abilities of SA students in general.

Academic Literacy: A brief overview

Defining academic literacy mainly depends on one's position and academic background in relation to this field of study. However, from a pedagogical perspective, Carstens (2012) posits that academic literacy "is about being multiliterate and combining a range of abilities that are conducive for making meaning as well as mediating and negotiating knowledge". Van Dyk and Van de Poel (2013, p. 46) add to Carstens' idea and postulate that academic literacy is "more than just being able to read and write". It is therefore evident that being academically literate includes the ability of students to transfer knowledge and move between the different discourse communities successfully.

When considering the evolution of thoughts and approaches to academic literacy, it is in the work of Bourdieu et al. (1994) that we find the conceptual pillars of this field. Van Schalkwyk (2008, p.11) summarises these as "the role that academic discourse plays in higher education; the 'linguistic misunderstanding' resulting from the diversity in our frames of reference; and the notions of power in the academic environment as they exist between student and teacher". Bourdieu et al. (1994, p. 28) argue that, "Many university students are unable to cope with the technical and scholastic demands made on their use of language…[and] cannot define the terms which they hear in lectures or which they themselves use". Put differently, students are at odds with the invisible rules and norms of academic discourse, the linguistic challenges these imply, and navigating through power relations in HE. The latter, in our opinion, has less to do with explicit discrimination against students and more to do with prevailing broken lines of communication and the mutual lack of awareness regarding the expectations of lecturers and students; also problematic is the lack of shared vision amongst university staff.

In connection with Bourdieu et al.’s (1994) aforementioned first conceptual pillar, it is worth noting that students might have difficulties understanding why we use academic discourse, or why it is worth using. This is reflected in our class discussions and evident in the thousands of essays we grade annually. This amalgamation of issues is what literacy developers are continually trying to address. As a result, we have seen multiple paradigm shifts in academic literacy development.

Perhaps the most widely critiqued approach is the “study skills” model (Johl, 2002; Lea & Street, 1998; Warren, 2002). The study skills model focuses on the development of specific skills needed to be “academically literate”. Following this model students are presented *en masse* with remedial lessons/interventions to establish/develop certain academic literacy skills (writing, reading, referencing, structuring an academic text, etc.). However, this model does not allow for discipline specific development, and is therefore viewed by Wingate (2007, p. 398), as a deficit model seeking to “bring about behavioural change in students by providing de-contextualised specialist inputs in a ‘bolt-on’ remedial approach”.

The study skills model was soon followed by the academic socialisation model, where students are inducted into their discipline and its norms. Lea and Street (2000) define this model as offering a student orientation to learning and being concerned with acculturating scholars into the subject's discourse and the different necessary genres. The third model is the “academic literacies” model. This model is closely aligned with the New

Literacy Studies and is, according to Lea and Street (2006), concerned with "meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context" (p. 369).

There has been criticism of all three of the models mentioned above. Still, despite the criticism, academic literacy researchers/practitioners should draw from all three of these models, or, as Wilmot (2015, p.7) states, we need to "play a balancing act between providing the richness of a socio-cultural new literacies approach, and one which incorporates elements of a study skills approach to enable scholars to gain the linguistic tools needed to access academic literacies".

Given the fact that students from all disciplines need to be academically literate, Lillis and Scott (2007) argue that academic literacy "draws on a number of disciplinary fields and subfields … [and] it is a field of enquiry with a specific epistemological and ideological stance towards the study of academic communication, and particularly ... writing" (p. 5). Academic literacy can, therefore, be seen as having a transdisciplinary nature, drawing on the following disciplines or areas of research: anthropology, the New Literacy Studies movement, applied and sociolinguistics, as well as systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (writing in particular), literary theory, rhetorical studies, critical discourse studies, communication studies, language and learning, sociology and socio-cultural theories of learning, psychology, and multimodality (Van Dyk & Van de Poel, 2013).

This transdisciplinary nature results in a situation where, as Van Dyk and Van de Poel (2013) postulate, because "research is often conducted by experts in a specific discipline, for example, history or law, one may not expect that these researchers are necessarily trained in the areas of education or linguistics (the natural academic home of writing), or even interested in the ‘language’ elements related to their specific disciplines”. Van Dyk and Van de Poel’s (2013, p.50) point is that there is a “lack of interdisciplinary collaboration with regard to developing theory and responsibly designing practices to enhance academic literacies that will truly benefit students”, and this is in our opinion the key problem in successfully assisting students in their academic literacy acquisition process.

A balanced approach to academic literacies development

The researchers believe that the academic literacy movement is, as it now stands, at a critical juncture between what Wilmot (2015, p. 1) refers to as the “autonomous model” and “ideological model”. Wilmot (quoting Street, 2003, p. 77) refers to the autonomous model as an approach prioritising “a set of cognitive, technical and neutral skills”. This model could be seen as one imposing Western conceptions of academic literacy, because of its prescriptive characteristics. A salient example of this model is the traditional rhetoric course (CTR) commonly practised in the USA from the early 1900s to the 1980s. Here linguistic structures and systems were posed as the central concern of academic writing development. Learners would merely have to acquire these skills (without question) through the mode of rote learning, whilst disregarding the influence of socio-cultural background and their individual and discipline-specific academic voices. This approach is frequently criticised, perhaps too harshly, but one must consider the *zeitgeist* under which it was developed. Research, now available to the academic community, has unequivocally proven that the approach does not work, especially in countries with a vast array of socio-cultural backgrounds. Because of this fact, in contrast to the autonomous model, Wilmot (2015) proposes the ideological model. In essence, the ideological model posits that literacy is developed through social practices. According to Wilmot (2015), social practice as a concept is rooted in the notion that reading and writing is inexorably linked to conceptions of socially constructed knowledge, identity, and being. Plainly put, students' ability to read and write is embedded in their social backgrounds (worldview/s) and learning needs to tap into this context to be successful.

The ideological model marks a milestone for academic literacies development; however, curriculum developers and teachers constantly balance the choice of strategies that work for their contexts. Consequently, Wilmot (2015) discusses the three aforementioned hierarchical perspectives: the study skills model, academic socialisation model, and academic literacy model. In Wilmot's view, the study skills model perceives the path of academic literacy (as distinct from academic literacies) development as based on language learning, much like CTR. Here, the student is considered to be a vessel filled with knowledge and skills; i.e., involved in internalisation of knowledge and skills through saturation / repetition. The second, the academic socialisation model, views the acculturation process as homogenous, with little regard to deep language, discourse, and literacy issues critical to academic writing. The third, the literacies as social practices model, which takes a "practice over text" approach, is favoured by Wilmot.

The practice over text approach centralises meaning-making, with three considerations:

- Locating conventions in relation to specific and contested traditions of knowledge-making.
- Eliciting writers' perspectives on how such conventions impinge on their meaning-making.
- Exploring alternative ways of meaning-making in academia, not least in considering the resources that writers (scholars) bring to the academy as legitimate tools for meaning-making.

Wilmot's (2015) three considerations could significantly impact the development of academic literacies. Teaching and learning would, in this case, require a significant effort to develop metacognitive abilities because students would not just internalise any given concept, but would also convey academic understanding according to acceptable standards. Therefore, a solid foundation of academic literacy skills needs to be developed. These non-negotiable basic skills presuppose a basic academic vocabulary, grammar, genre, text types, structure, and academic rhetoric.

Academic language acquisition remains a highly contested issue, as Hurst (2015) noted. The HE sector is not yet abreast with the national drive to recognise indigenous languages in teaching and learning, to deal with the failing Basic Education system, and to provide sufficient resources to develop institutional capabilities to accommodate all sociolinguistic backgrounds. To add to this, English has been adopted by the South African industrial complex as the *lingua franca*; further, professional bodies are becoming increasingly concerned with the English language and communication deficit among graduates. Consequently, they are appealing to the HE sectors to improve the

English language competency of students along with the accompanying critical communication skills. Hurst (2015) also recognises that English language proficiency plays a central role in student success. Therefore, given that the Basic Education Sector does not adequately prepare students for higher learning, that industry and the professions require skills development, and that there has been a progressive shift from the autonomous/study skills approach, HE needs to find new avenues for holistic academic literacies development without excluding critical language development.

Building on the notion of an ideological model, Boughey and McKenna (2016) have made a case for the notion of the “decontextualised learner”. For Boughey and Mckenna, the autonomous model, still widely practised by academic literacy practitioners, creates many barriers for students across the board, particularly students who lack academic and social capital. These barriers are, for the most part, inadequate language abilities and epistemological understanding to perform complex academic tasks. They argue that students are in many instances so far removed from academic discourse that it becomes virtually impossible for them to make the leap from the social discourse developed in their lifeworld to academic discourse. Academic discourse is, in this context, sketched as a foreign language with rules and norms that must be acquired with little evidence of cultural integration. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the higher education sector is continually going through substantial challenges to address the shortcomings of their curricula and, as is the case at the NWU, it becomes a mammoth task to adopt an ideological model due to the sheer magnitude of the number of students, and the lack of time, resources and space in curricula. Another factor often overlooked is the lack of academic literacies development training among subject experts.

What Boughey and McKenna (2016) are suggesting would require that we have more meaningful interaction with students, interaction that leads to a fruitful discussion on complex concepts, both technical and conceptual, and which leads to deep learning. In this regard, Boughey and McKenna (2016, p. 3) do not dispute the fact that language is a central component, but they instead argue for the "language as a resource" model. Here, language becomes a secondary concern – an instrument for the informed learner – and is mainly used to challenge existing notions. Within this context, what becomes central is the development of ideas, followed by developing solid critique and then presenting it in academic discourse. Academic literacies development should, at least in part, become spaces for public discourse, where opportunities are granted to various voices, followed by writing workshops with a range of qualitative feedback strategies. Of course, this is ideal, but what about the students with low literacy levels?

Even though forum-type writing workshops already make for enhanced transformation, there is yet the issue of generic academic literacy approaches to consider. Jacobs (2013) concedes that this is due to the historical development of academic literacy models across institutions, but she argues that we should push the boundaries of contextual appropriateness and feasibility. Essentially, Jacobs argues that institutions should make a concerted effort to develop academic literacy strategies to include disciplinary knowledge. Academic literacy modules commonly teach norms and conventions and their philosophical underpinnings in their generic form. This could be due to class sizes, institutional position, and because humanities scholars are the primary teachers of academic literacy. Humanities scholars are (usually) trained to teach and understand generic academic writing, not academic writing embedded in disciplines. Therefore, there is the need for interdisciplinary collaboration, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

There are concerted efforts within the NWU academic literacy subject group to include as many discipline-specific writing norms and conventions as possible through consultations with subject-matter experts, treated as discourse partners. Yet, when compared with what Jacobs (2013) would argue is "making explicit for students the principles on what counts as knowledge in disciplines" (p. 132), it also becomes impossible to make "explicit for students the principles through which new knowledge is created" (ibid.). Jacob's suggestions imply that we find credible ways to prioritise knowledge, especially disciplinary knowledge, over literacy skills and writing. Perhaps this can be done by including disciplinary experts in course and assessment development, inviting these lecturers to class engagements, or developing multimodal materials for reflective exercises. This would most likely improve student engagement because students would discover for themselves the relevance of the skills required to learn a discipline.

Initiatives and interventions to develop students' academic literacy

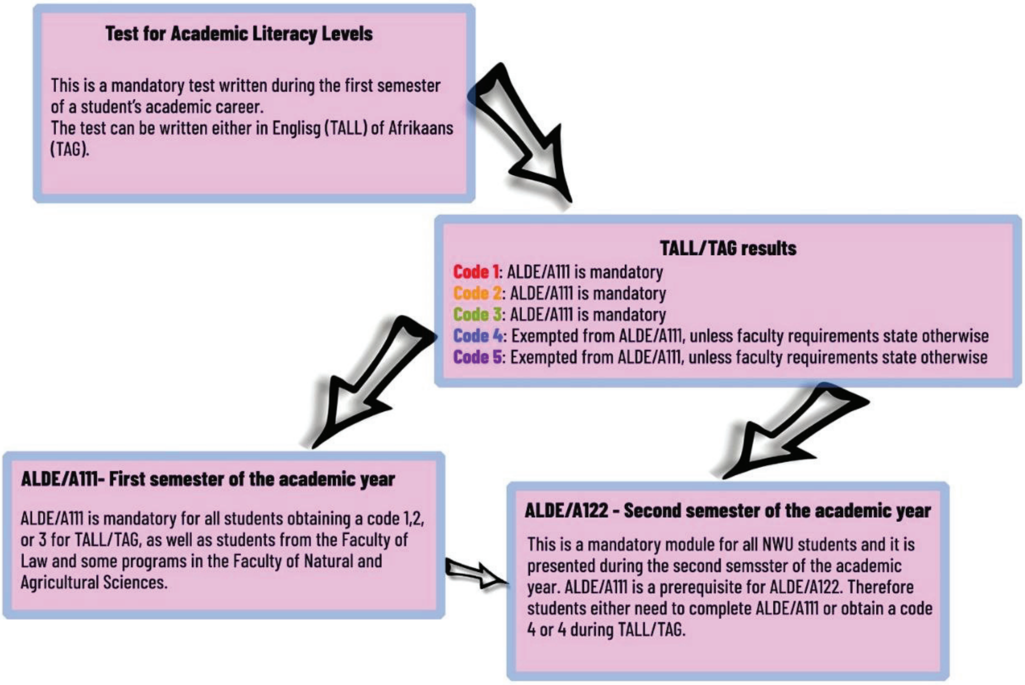
Being part of an academic community includes joining in its academic discourse while adhering to the various discourse norms of the said academic community. When students write academic texts, they are expected to communicate with other academic community members clearly, ethically, and in an acceptable manner. Therefore, students are evaluated for their ability to communicate in writing while adhering to the prescribed norms of their specific field of study. Consequently, one could argue that students' success depends on their writing abilities. Given that students entering universities come from different backgrounds and with varying levels of competency, it is of utmost importance that universities have support structures and developmental modules in place, which should assist the student in the academic acculturation process and help develop these crucial academic literacy skills. The notion of supporting students through 1) support services, such as a writing centre, or 2) academic literacy modules is not a new one; in fact, initiatives and interventions through which students' writing abilities are developed have been growing in South Africa over the past 39 years (Parkinson et al., 2008).

Although this support initially took the form of general language proficiency courses (bridging courses), through which students with language inadequacies were supported (Butler, 2007), simply presenting a 'one-size-fits-all' language module was not a successful intervention.

The NWU has not fallen behind in providing academic writing support to its students. Various innovations and developments are focused on supporting and developing students' academic literacy skills. Examples of such support services are the academic literacy modules (presented by the Subject Group, Academic Literacy), three established writing centres, Supplemental Instruction (SI), Peer Mentoring (PM), and library training. This text is focused on developing a strategy to create awareness of the NWU writing support interventions – WrCr and academic literacy modules – as spaces supporting writing in the various academic disciplines.

Academic Literacy at the NWU

The subject group, Academic Literacy, has a footprint across the three NWU campuses and offers academic literacy modules to all first-year students at the university. The module ALDE/A111 is added on to the credit-bearing programme offering, and is in some instances compulsory (if the student is shown as being 'at risk' after the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) or *Toets van Akademiese Geletterdheidsvlakke* (TAG)), and in other cases it is additional – depending on faculty-specific decisions. The module ALDE/A122 or its equivalent on the Potchefstroom campus (PC), ALDE/A112, is included in the credit-bearing programme offering and is, therefore, compulsory for all students for them to be able to graduate. Academic literacy modules are offered in contact (full-time and part-time) and Open Distance Learners (ODL) modes. More than 12 000 students *per annum* receive academic literacy interventions. TALL for English and TAG for Afrikaans, the property of ICELDA, are used on all three campuses to determine the academic literacy levels of all first-year students (see figure 1).



Test for Academic Literacy Levels

This is a mandatory test written during the first semester of a student's academic career.
The test can be written either in Englisg (TALL) of Afrikaans (TAG).

TALL/TAG results

Code 1: ALDE/A111 is mandatory
Code 2: ALDE/A111 is mandatory
Code 3: ALDE/A111 is mandatory
Code 4: Exempted from ALDE/A111, unless faculty requirements state otherwise
Code 5: Exempted from ALDE/A111, unless faculty requirements state otherwise

ALDE/A111- First semester of the academic year

ALDE/A111 is mandatory for all students obtaining a code 1,2, or 3 for TALL/TAG, as well as students from the Faculty of Law and some programs in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences.

ALDE/A122 - Second semester of the academic year

This is a mandatory module for all NWU students and it is presented during the second semsster of the academic year. ALDE/A111 is a prerequisite for ALDE/A122. Therefore students either need to complete ALDE/A111 or obtain a code 4 or 4 during TALL/TAG.

Figure 1: Academic Literacy Modules and placement test

The high reliability and validity measures of this instrument enable us to make confident deductions to practically and functionally support students in completing their studies successfully (Cooper & Van Dyk, 2003; Van Dyk, 2010; Van Dyk et al 2013; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004a; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004b; Weideman, 2012). Over several years, the results of the tests have shown that a substantial proportion of students allowed to enrol at NWU are “at-risk” regarding low levels of academic literacy. The first-year students who are shown to be at risk concerning their academic literacy levels need to register for ALDE/A111. Still, all first-year students, irrespective of the result they obtained for the TALL/TAG test (Van Dyk, 2010) at the beginning of the year, must complete ALDE/A 112/122. On the Potchefstroom campus, [PC 112 is confusing] 112 is the compulsory module presented in the first semester to relieve some of the pressure created by high student numbers, while 122 is offered in the second semester for all three campuses. These two modules are exactly the same.

Students must be exposed to a relevant academic literacy intervention that assists them in completing their studies successfully in as short a time as realistically possible. The Academic Literacy programme provides students with the necessary skills to achieve just that. The academic literacy modules at the NWU (guided by the module outcomes) are made applicable to specific schools/faculties and languages of instruction, keeping in mind the differing needs of students on the different campuses and what will be of optimum benefit to them. Figure 2 illustrates the differences and the interconnectedness between the two academic literacy modules. In essence, both modules address the affordance of academic literacy that can empower students to work effectively with academic texts.

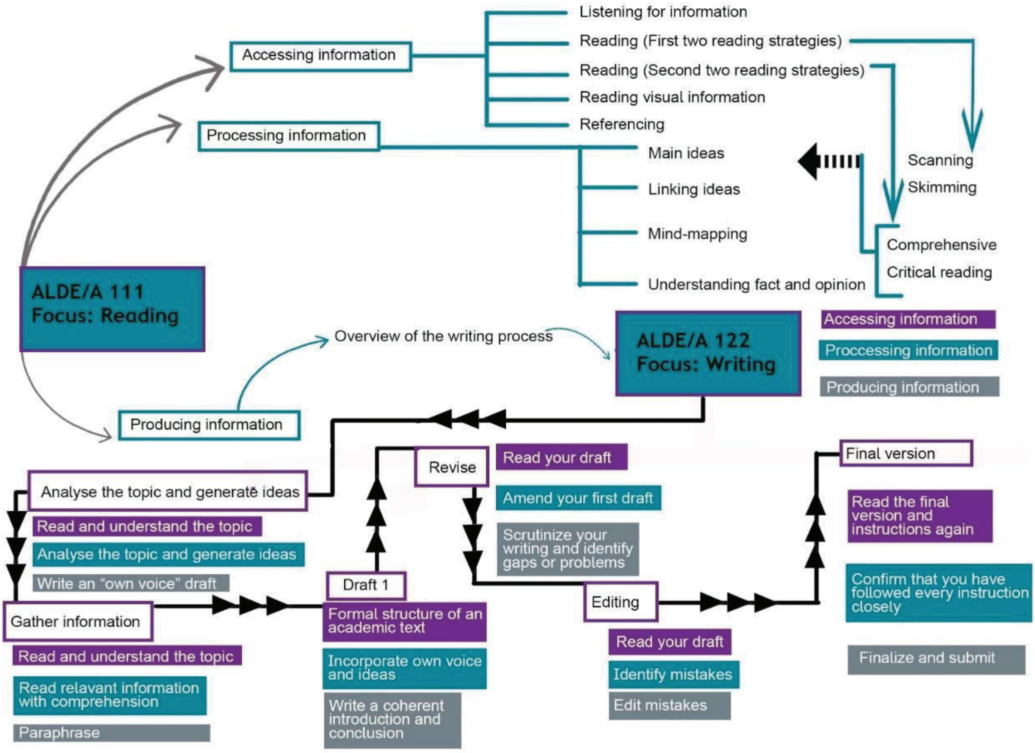

Listening for information
Reading (First two reading strategies)
Reading (Second two reading strategies)
Reading visual information
Referencing
Accessing information
Processing information
Main ideas
Linking ideas
Mind-mapping
Understanding fact and opinion
Scanning
Skimming
Comprehensive
Critical reading
ALDE/A 111
Focus: Reading
Overview of the writing process
ALDE/A 122
Focus: Writing
Accessing information
Proccessing information
Producing information
Producing information
Analyse the topic and generate ideas
Read and understand the topic
Analyse the topic and generate ideas
Write an "own voice" draft
Gather information
Read and understand the topic
Read relavant information with comprehension
Paraphrase
Revise
Read your draft
Amend your first draft
Scrutinize your writing and identify gaps or problems
Draft 1
Formal structure of an academic text
Incorporate own voice and ideas
Write a coherent introduction and conclusion
Editing
Read your draft
Identify mistakes
Edit mistakes
Final version
Read the final version and instructions again
Confirm that you have followed every instruction closely
Finalize and submit

Figure 2: Connectedness of ALDE/A111 and ALDE/A122

The ALDE/A111 module focuses strongly on receptive abilities (concentrates on academic reading: finding and processing information), aiming at developing a range of different, albeit related, abilities and ending with an introduction to academic writing. Conversely, the ALDE/A112/122 module is an integrated writing course (accessing, processing, and producing information).

Writing Centre at the NWU

Writing centres first originated in the United States of America, after which they were also implemented in Europe. The first formal writing centre in South Africa was established at Stellenbosch University (SU) with the help of

Dr Sherifa Daniels (former Director of SU WrCr) and fashioned after the typical model found in the Netherlands. The first NWU WrCr was established in 2009; the NWU WrCr was positioned in the School of Languages, with close ties to the academic literacy subject group.

The NWU WrCr is primarily influenced by Stephen North’s (1984) seminal article, *The Idea of the Writing Centre*. According to North’s (1984) response to the general misunderstanding of writing centres being fix-it shops, he argued that the ultimate focus of a writing centre should be: "to produce better writers, not better writing" (p. 438). Put differently, WrCr practitioners should not focus on the text, for there are various ethical and pedagogical issues to consider; rather, they should focus on the student (i.e., be student-centric). Regarding academic writing ethics, writing centre consultants – if they work on the text itself – could be considered collaborators, which could potentially contravene the rules of plagiarism (or academic integrity) policies. In addition, when a text is only edited and proofread, there is little impact on the academic writing development of the student.

Writing centres, thus, need people to work together via productive conversation towards lasting academic writing development. To this end, writing centre practitioners (at the NWU) have anchored their work in Lunsford’s (1991) notion of collaborative learning, primarily based on the theory of social construction of knowledge. Within this context, the consultant becomes a more experienced conversation partner, with tools to guide the student towards developing academic writing skills. Consequently, the collaborative effort to improve the student's knowledge of the text has a long-term impact on the student’s development. Thus, we could say that

North's maxim is the Archimedean point for any given theoretical framework, and Lunsford's notion of collaborative learning defines how writing centres should function.

The basic premise of the writing centre practice is to provide support to an individual who is experiencing difficulties writing an academic text. This presupposes two role players present: an individual seeking assistance and a more experienced individual providing that assistance. The most suitable theory that informs this model is Lev Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism. Vygotsky's theory offers guidelines in the complex setting of the writing consultation session, for he has provided us with the means to understand why we need theoretical guidance and what intervention has a lasting impact. Nordlof (2014), concerning Vygotsky's theory, states that "the typical role of theory within a discipline is to provide a broad explanation of the processes that underlie the surface phenomena that can be observed" (p. 48). In other words, theories provide the "why" to help us understand the "what".

Vygtosky developed the theory of proximal development based on his observations on how children with the help of others performed tasks they could not perform independently. Here, Vygotsky (1978) observed that we learn by interacting with our physical and social environments. He then proposed that the learning of tasks beyond a child's normal limits occurs through social interaction with a more experienced person; there is reciprocity between the learner and the skilled person when examining and performing tasks. This same idea is applied in the WrCr context, where a more experienced student assists a less experienced student with their writing to develop beyond their initial limitations.

Vygotsky posits that our learning takes place on two levels: actual development and the zone of proximal development. For Vygotsky (1978), actual development signifies the levels of development of the child’s mental functions, which have already been established by developmental cycles acquired through previous experience. With the second level, the zone of proximal development, learning takes place with the guidance of a more experienced individual like an older playmate, or a student consultant in the writing centre context. The zone of proximal development implies that children/students have independent and unique problem-solving skills. Still, optimal learning comes through the proxy of a more experienced individual facilitating the development (Vygotsky, 1978). It is also essential to note that students have individual needs when scaffolding is applied to the learning context. Every writer has different levels of proficiency; therefore, every writer needs individualised intervention to help develop complex concepts in academic writing in general and to facilitate these concepts in relation to how they are applied in their fields.

The NWU WrCr environment is built around the idea of individualised service for students according to their specific proficiency levels. Consultations function within a socially curated context based on conversations and demonstrations to promote learning and development. This fact is in keeping with Vygotsky’s (1978) notion that “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children [or students] grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 39). Writing centres create safe spaces conducive to academic writing development. Therefore, in terms of in-session activity, consultants preferably focus on students' work to provide concrete guidance within a safe context. This strategy is based on an experiment performed by Vygotsky (1978), confirming that working with concrete exercises the children could associate with stimulated abstract thinking.

Interestingly, at some writing centres, it is taboo for consultants to work with a text provided by the student. At these writing centres the consultant should rather focus on a specific writing skill to be developed. It is believed that this method takes the emphasis away from the text to instead focus on the student's ability to develop skills autonomously. However, in such cases, writing development takes place on an abstract level. Even if relevant exercises are done, these exercises do not necessarily match the discourses of students' subject fields or the intricacies pertaining to their issues. Furthermore, if these exercises are related to relevant subject fields, they most likely do not address students' problems in real time. Most consultants will encounter students who come to the WrCr out of necessity to overcome individual writing problems rather than to develop their writing ability in general.

However, regarding the Vygotskian framework discussed above, there are two main approaches to WrCr consultations: text or student-centred approaches. Text-centred strategies may be beneficial in certain respects, but when focusing on the text, there is a strong possibility that the student's identity and voice will not be prioritised. This is because the text will be interpreted without reasonable input from the student (i.e., two-way conversations on difficulties experienced during the formulation of a text); furthermore, staying in this mode, one might as well resort to regular text editing and proofreading. Therefore, with reference to points made by North and Lunsford, a student-centred approach is more advantageous for academic writing development in the writing centre environment. With this approach, we become aware of the students' needs and evident abilities and how these relate to the specific text and its context, which the student presents to the consultant. The consultant then uses the text to aid the student in discovering new skills while simultaneously improving the text.

Issues with the current initiatives and interventions at the NWU

As discussed above, we contend that our academic literacy modules and the WrCrs has a reasonably balanced approach in supporting the NWU in academic literacies development. However, some shortcomings are apparent regarding our overall coverage within the Institution. The NWU is currently the second-largest HE institution in South Africa after the University of South Africa (UNISA). Our student numbers range between 60 000-80 000 on an annual basis, of which approximately 11 500 students are enrolled for one (or two) of the academic literacy modules discussed above. This amounts to a ratio of roughly 380 students per academic literacy lecturer. In addition, the WrCr employs between 20-30 student consultants, depending on availability. In total, then, approximately 80 staff members are involved in academic literacies development. Apart from a lack of staff and resources, a lack experienced by writing centres globally (García-Arroyo & Quintana, 2012), there is no clear indication of how many additional academic literacies development initiatives exist across the institution or in what form they manifest themselves.

Our WrCr aims to provide personalised feedback during the writing process, notably absent in the past. However, again, writing centres across South Africa are notoriously understaffed and underfunded. The root of the problem is that we are positioned in the Faculty of Humanities, under the Director of the School for Languages. At the NWU, this implies that our funding is limited within the faculty budgetary structure. Consequently, we have not been able to appoint consultants for fixed-term contracts, because there is too little financial incentive for non-humanities students to be employed for more extended periods. This inevitably leads to a high turnover rate of consultants, which leads to time and resources spent training consultants on an annual basis.

Closely linked to the issue of scarce resources and difficulties retaining staff, an accurate assessment of our shortcomings must include lack of disciplinary-specific academic writing expertise. Supporting students in their domains requires that consultants be experienced writers in their fields, and that they exhibit, or soon acquire, the more refined academic writing abilities of being able to transfer these skills to others. For these purposes, we always strive to appoint consultants with the best academic credentials, from a range of fields, and representing as many cultural groups as possible.

The nature of these academic literacy modules pose some constraints on their ability to impact the Institution’s academic literacy maturity. The primary limitation is that the Faculty of Humanities hosts this module. Students are then only exposed to this module for a maximum of two semesters (assuming they pass the first time). One might argue that even such limited exposure could have a long-lasting impact, but, realistically (and in most cases), within the limits of one or two semesters only so much can be achieved.

Nevertheless, the academic literacy courses are packed with crucial information to build foundational skills. We start with foundational skills because of the overall literacy levels of students entering university. So in the first semester (or entry-level ALDA/E111), the focus is on developing the fundamental academic vocabulary, getting students accustomed to academic registers, informing them on academic text structures and the philosophy and importance of author attribution. In the second semester, we aim to achieve higher levels of abstraction and some degree of disciplinary-specific training (see figure 2).

Within this context, there are, furthermore, limited opportunities for personalised qualitative feedback. Personalised qualitative feedback is crucial for academic writing development because, as discussed above, the linguistic and social capital with which students enter university is not aligned with the standards required for academic writing in HE. In keeping with “language as a resource”, we approach writing through meaning-making, but as assessments approach, we discover that the technical/formal vocabulary of the students falls short; but more alarming is that the students struggle with logical cohesion and coherence.

Developing crucial writing skills: A revised NWU approach

It is evident from our discussion, especially concerning the complex nature of academic literacy and the need for adequate academic acculturation support, as well as the above-mentioned issues with the current initiatives and interventions at the NWU, that there should be a fundamental shift in how we approach the complex acculturation process first-year students embark upon. Previously (and still for the most part), HE has neglected to consider the myriad factors that influence student learning, including those pertaining to academic literacies. As a result, the needs of students alienated from their life-worlds and other marginalised students have been neglected; the need to improve their language and academic writing skills should be prioritised. As stated in the sections explaining the interventions and initiatives at the NWU (refer to Academic Literacy at the NWU and Writing centre at the NWU), we have already accomplished much regarding our offerings and subsequent support and interventions regarding students. However, when evaluating the initiatives and interventions already instituted, it is clear that we can indeed still improve, especially in terms of our approach to reaching a greater audience whilst improving the quality of our input.

This improvement should be initiated by developing an improved strategy to create awareness of NWU writing support interventions. The various functions of these interventions should be highlighted and explained to all stakeholders. Once a better understanding and awareness of the NWU writing support interventions have been created, we should consider an alternative framework to shape academic literacies development at the

NWU. Active participation from all the faculties would be essential in the creation of such a framework. As informed by relevant literature, we surmise that our alternative approach to the development of academic literacies at the NWU should be based on the following principles:

- The underlying philosophy should be to design a curriculum that recognises a diverse student population, and therein we should seek methods to enhance inclusive engagement (Wilmot, 2015).
- Engagement should be conceptualised to prioritise meaning-making, recognition of identity, critical engagement in power relations, and knowledge-construction politics (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Jacobs, 2013).
- The generic academic literacy approach should complement a disciplinary approach (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Jacobs, 2013).
- Language should be developed as a resource for meaning-making (Boughey & McKenna, 2016).

How would one achieve better awareness and implementation of the proposed fundamentals towards an alternative strategy to NWU writing support interventions? Since the subject-group Academic Literacy and the WrCr are situated within the Faculty of Humanities but render services to students from all faculties across the NWU, our first point of departure would be to create awareness of the function and impact of ALDE/A and the WrCr across the NWU. Given the complex nature of the services rendered by ALDE/A and the WrCr, we need to inform all stakeholders of our services and the outcomes of the ALDE/A modules. Although the information regarding ALDE/A is readily available in the various Faculty Yearbooks and on the NWU website, we can assume that neither students nor other stakeholders genuinely engage with the descriptive content through which our services and purpose are explained.

To counter this, we (ALDE/A and WrCr) need to develop a marketing strategy through which students are made (more) aware of the necessity of the academic literacy modules and the role these modules play in the academic acculturation process. The services provided by the WrCr should also be included in this marketing strategy since the work of the WrCr can be seen as an additional intervention to assist students in the acculturation process.

In addition to making students more aware by creating a better understanding of the purpose of ALDE/A and the WrCR, it is crucial to target and subsequently inform all stakeholders. In addition to the students, top management should better understand our services and the challenges regarding our high student-lecturer ratio. Added to the stakeholders are parents, guardians, and all lecturers at the NWU. Once all these parties understand what we do, how it is done, what is expected from students, and, most importantly, the purpose of ALDE/A and the WrCr, we can move on to the second phase of our alternative strategy.

Another challenge previously mentioned is that there is no clear indication of the number of academic literacies development initiatives across the Institution or in what form they manifest themselves. Although there are various surveys[32], and committees and sub-committees, focussing on student development, alignment and needs analysis – all to eventually develop and improve the NWU's offerings and support to students – the communication on ground level, that is, between faculties/programmes and ALDE/A and the WrCr, is lacking. We as lecturers should work together, rather than trying to support students without reference to any previous modules completed or support given to students. With this in mind, we will analyse all the survey data available mentioned above to improve our joint efforts.

Following the marketing campaign, our next logical step would be to improve communication between the various faculties and ourselves (ALDE/A and the WrCr). Our aim by improving communication is to identify writing-intensive modules or academic literacies development initiatives per programme. This will enable us to liaison with these module owners or individuals in charge of the development initiatives, leading to a collaborative approach to developing students' academic literacy skills.

Once we have identified the writing-intensive modules or academic literacies development initiatives per programme and opened the lines of communication between ourselves and the other faculties (right down to programme-level), we will need to re-evaluate and restructure the ALDE/A modules. As already explained, we differentiate between two different modules, the ALDE/A111 and the ALDE/A122 (or 112) module. While the

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[32] Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT), Siyaphumelela network, Survey for Student Engagement, NWU Student Success Data Plan, Student Teaching and Learning Survey data

ALDE/A111 module is developed with a faculty-specific teaching approach in mind, the ALDE/A122 (and 112) module follows a generic path. These modules are presented as first-year modules, and based on the arguments presented in this chapter, we might be able to reach a more significant number of students if we restructure the modules.

Since the ALDE/A111 module is aimed at more 'at risk' students (those not able to perform in the TAG/TALL), as well as students required to complete this module by their faculties, it seems that a more generic module would better address the needs of these students than our current faculty-specific approach to ALDE/A111. If we were to redesign this module, we could refocus it and structure it as a generic module, presented to students from all faculties where we follow the study skills model and some of the principles from the academic socialisation model.

Combining these two models will allow us to create a foundation on which we could build during the more advanced ALDE/A122 module. Following an approach based on both the study skills and the academic socialisation model (whilst still driving towards the underlying principles of the ideological model), we can focus on the development of skills needed for processing information and the process of producing information, which in turn will enable us to start creating an awareness of acculturating students into the discourse of the subject and the different necessary genres.

Regarding the advanced ALDE/A122 module, a more faculty-specific module in which the academic socialisation and Academic Literacies models are followed could benefit the students. By redesigning the more advanced Academic Literacy module, focussing on the needs of students according to their faculties and the expectations regarding academic discourse in the various faculties, the overall academic literacy of students could be improved. By shifting the focus and utilising the principles from the academic socialisation and Academic Literacies models in our teaching approach, we will build on existing skills and further develop the students' ability to effectively work with academic discourse.

A significant issue with the ALDE/A modules and academic literacy support is that students only receive support during their first year and are then left to their own devices. In a perfect world, the subject group Academic Literacy should be involved in developing the skills needed to perform well in their academic discourse community throughout a student's undergraduate studies.

If the first two phases (marketing and communication) of the revised approach to academic literacy support were to be a success, it would be possible to approach the lecturers involved in writing-intensive modules at the second and third-year levels. Academic Literacy could then be involved in these modules as well. This proposed involvement should be limited to a supportive function, where the subject specialists in academic literacy assist the subject specialists in the various programmes to develop the students' academic discourse proficiency.

The idea is that an academic literacy lecturer acts as a guest lecturer, focussing on structure, source use and integration, referencing, and elements generally linked with the ALDE/A modules. The subject specialist focuses on content, presentation, and interaction with information from sources. This collaborative approach would be to the benefit students and would allow us to provide support in the second and third years.

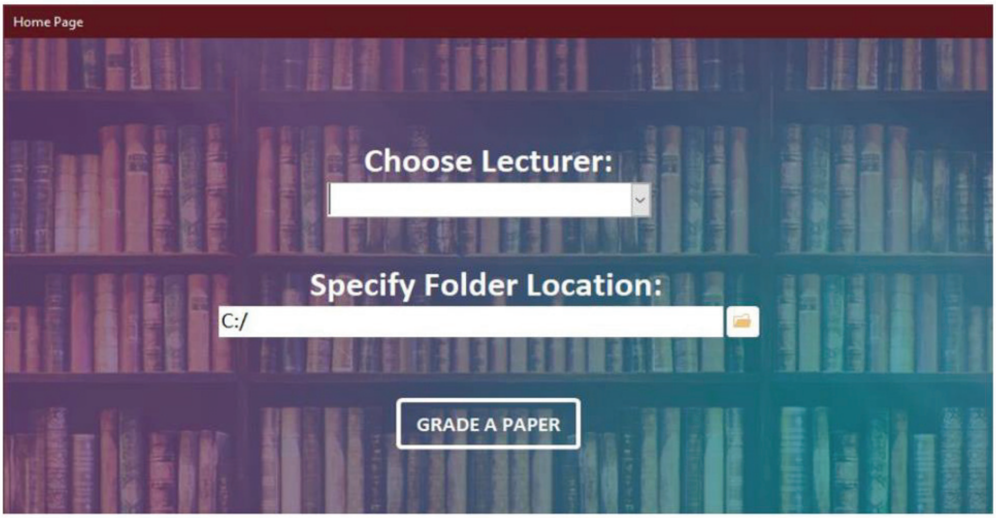
The revised approach to academic literacies development would also allow the WrCr to be better utilised as a supplementary resource. One could, for instance, render the services of the WrCr after identifying problems which need individualised interventions. In doing so, we would establish partnerships between the WrCr and faculties while developing writing skills across disciplines in students. For these purposes, we will improve on previous interventions done in collaboration with the Faculties of Humanities, Engineering, Health Sciences and Law. These interventions supported faculties by supplying consultants for writing-intensive modules. Now, consultants would assist students in previously identified areas of concern by providing one-on-one personalised academic writing support. The WrCr could also increase the number (and sharpen the focus) of workshops for under- and post-graduate students, based on the problems identified while assisting senior students.

We have, here, presented our take on a revised NWU approach to developing crucial writing skills. It should be evident that this approach is hypothetical and that implementing a revised approach would entail far more than what is conveyed by our basic proposition.

Current initiatives to improve our offering

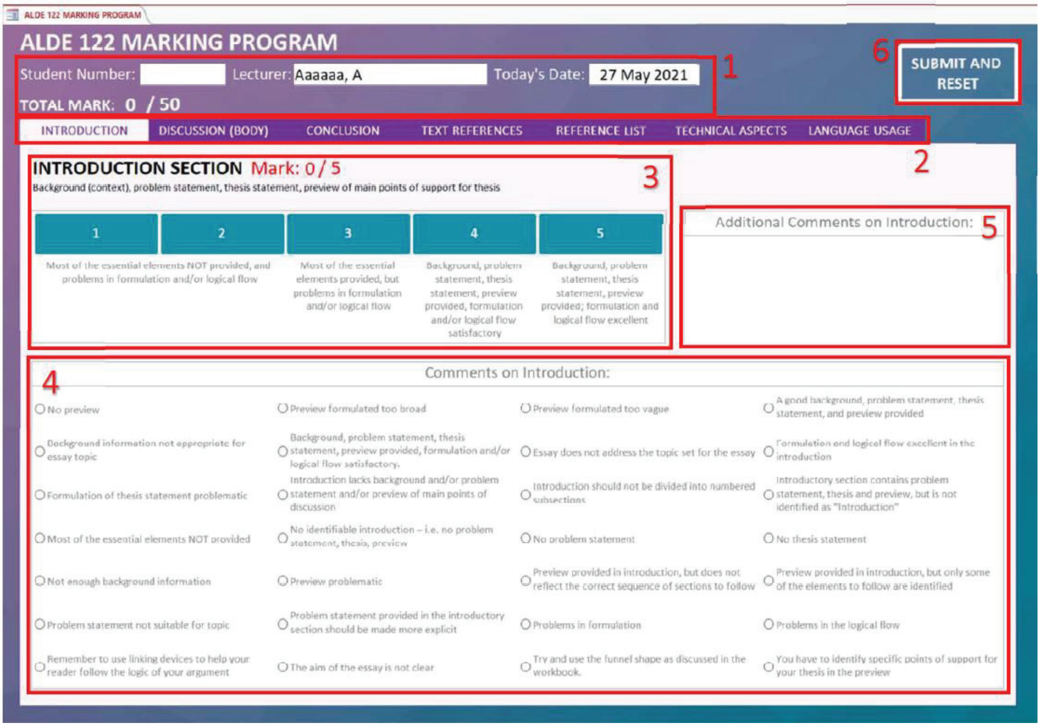
We are well aware that the implementation of the approach, presented above in hypothetical terms, will not necessarily happen in the near future. Given the fact that we want to support our students to the best of our abilities, and since we are aware of aspects of our existing support initiatives that could be improved, we are constantly finding ways to improve our current services. These include improving our online content, developing video resources in the four official NWU languages, and engaging in continuous efforts to determine how best to assist students.

One of our more recent developments is an eMarking programme. The eMarking programme refers to a development emerging as a means to address our shortcomings in providing thorough feedback. The eMarking system contains pre-formulated feedback compiled by our senior staff members, as well as a dedicated comment section where a lecturer can add specific commentary. This eMarking system then merges the feedback into a personalised feedback document containing the relevant marking scheme with scores and feedback attributed to each category (see Figures 3, 4, and 5 below).



C:/

Figure 3: eMarking programme: Home screen



Student Number:
Lecturer: Aaaaaa, A
Today's Date: 27 May 2021
TOTAL MARK: 0 / 50

INTRODUCTION SECTION Mark: 0 / 5
Background (context), problem statement, thesis statement, preview of main points of support for thesis

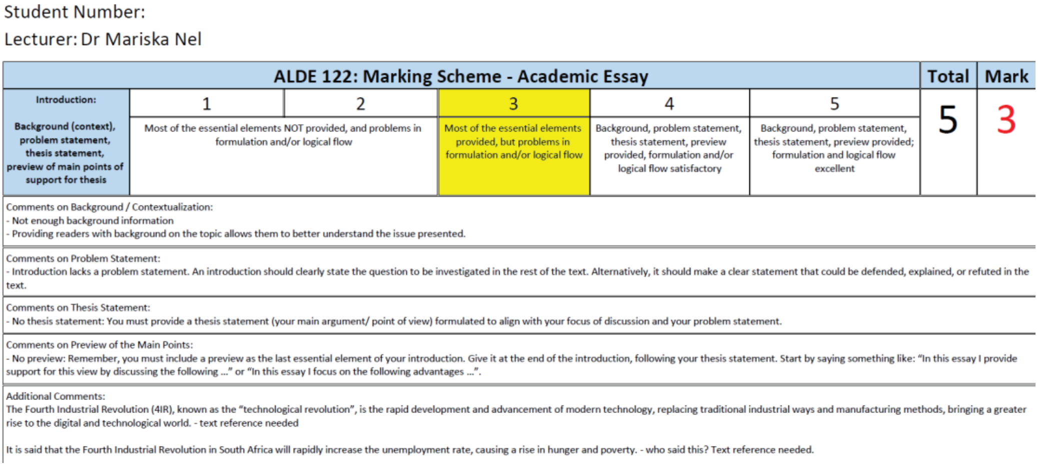
1	2	3	4	5
Most of the essential elements NOT provided, and problems in formulation and/or logical flow		Most of the essential elements provided, but problems in formulation and/or logical flow	Background, problem statement, thesis statement, preview provided, formulation and/or logical flow satisfactory	Background, problem statement, thesis statement, preview provided; formulation and logical flow excellent

Additional Comments on Introduction:

Comments on Introduction:

○ No preview
○ Background information not appropriate for essay topic
○ Formulation of thesis statement problematic
○ Most of the essential elements NOT provided
○ Not enough background information
○ Problem statement not suitable for topic
○ Remember to use linking devices to help your reader follow the logic of your argument
○ Preview formulated too broad
○ Background, problem statement, thesis statement, preview provided, formulation and/or logical flow satisfactory.
○ Introduction lacks background and/or problem statement and/or preview of main points of discussion
○ No identifiable introduction – i.e. no problem statement, thesis, preview
○ Preview problematic
○ Problem statement provided in the introductory section should be made more explicit
○ The aim of the essay is not clear
○ Preview formulated too vague
○ Essay does not address the topic set for the essay
○ Introduction should not be divided into numbered subsections
○ No problem statement
○ Preview provided in introduction, but does not reflect the correct sequence of sections to follow
○ Problems in formulation
○ Try and use the funnel shape as discussed in the workbook.
○ A good background, problem statement, thesis statement, and preview provided
○ Formulation and logical flow excellent in the introduction
○ Introductory section contains problem statement, thesis and preview, but is not identified as "Introduction"
○ No thesis statement
○ Preview provided in introduction, but only some of the elements to follow are identified
○ Problems in the logical flow
○ You have to identify specific points of support for your thesis in the preview

Figure 4: eMarking programme dashboard



Student Number:
Lecturer: Dr Mariska Nel

ALDE 122: Marking Scheme - Academic Essay						Total	Mark
Introduction:	1	2	3	4	5	5	3
Background (context), problem statement, thesis statement, preview of main points of support for thesis	Most of the essential elements NOT provided, and problems in formulation and/or logical flow		Most of the essential elements provided, but problems in formulation and/or logical flow	Background, problem statement, thesis statement, preview provided, formulation and/or logical flow satisfactory	Background, problem statement, thesis statement, preview provided; formulation and logical flow excellent		

Comments on Background / Contextualization:
- Not enough background information
- Providing readers with background on the topic allows them to better understand the issue presented.

Comments on Problem Statement:
- Introduction lacks a problem statement. An introduction should clearly state the question to be investigated in the rest of the text. Alternatively, it should make a clear statement that could be defended, explained, or refuted in the text.

Comments on Thesis Statement:
- No thesis statement: You must provide a thesis statement (your main argument/ point of view) formulated to align with your focus of discussion and your problem statement.

Comments on Preview of the Main Points:
- No preview: Remember, you must include a preview as the last essential element of your introduction. Give it at the end of the introduction, following your thesis statement. Start by saying something like: "In this essay I provide support for this view by discussing the following ..." or "In this essay I focus on the following advantages ...".

Additional Comments:
The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), known as the "technological revolution", is the rapid development and advancement of modern technology, replacing traditional industrial ways and manufacturing methods, bringing a greater rise to the digital and technological world. - text reference needed

It is said that the Fourth Industrial Revolution in South Africa will rapidly increase the unemployment rate, causing a rise in hunger and poverty. - who said this? Text reference needed.

Figure 5: eMarking programme output file

Even though this is a step in the right direction, we have yet to determine this instrument's impact amongst academic literacy students. We are also working towards improving our software, adding multimodal feedback through links to videos and guiding materials, with each layer of help designed to catch the students' interest and, most importantly, develop metacognitive skills. The goal is to develop guiding materials that enable student self-reflection regarding their work.

During 2022, we will further refine the eMarking software, especially in relation to the performance data of students and lecturers. At present, we can extract student profiles and intermarker reliability data. However, this data is not yet collated with various other data points such as placements test data (TAG & TALL as referred to above), learning management system data, and student performance data gathered from formal assessments. Therefore, the aim is to develop a system that will be able to collate all the available data to determine risk factors as early as possible. This will allow us to offer remedial interventions before students are at risk of failing the module. Another significant advantage of this system is that it could provide a clearer picture of the acculturation process and provide insight into multilingual language development. Considering all the possible key indicators that might be produced, the researchers would find improved means to move towards discipline-specific academic literacy development.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a brief overview of academic literacy in South Africa, followed by relevant literature used to develop a rudimentary framework for a balanced response to the development of academic literacies. We discussed NWU WrCr theory and praxis, and framed our current academic literacies development context; we also sketched the current initiatives and interventions at the NWU in order to propose a revised approach to assist in students' academic acculturation as well as the development of crucial academic writing skills in HE. In addition, before detailing the case of NWU academic literacies development and the WrCr, we situated it against a global background through references to relevant literature. This revealed that the NWU is not exceptional in developing academic literacies and WrCrs to enhance the process of acculturation. We also noted that increasing diversity in levels of literacies and backgrounds at the time of entry into university are also among the global concerns that hamper universities' efforts to develop academic literacy skills.

We then focused specifically on the *status quo* of academic literacies development at the NWU, with particular reference to Subject-group Academic literacy and the WrCr. Details of the modules and assessment procedures were highlighted, to outline the efforts by the NWU in supporting students who might not be able to successfully acculturate to the HE community because of a lack of aptitude in academic discourse (threatening their prospects of graduating, or at least graduating within a reasonable time frame).

From both the literature and a survey of the *status quo* of academic literacies and the WrCr at NWU, it was shown that efforts have indeed been made to support students to acculturate. However, a revised NWU approach is now under development, addressing crucial academic writing skills, in line with our suggestions in this article. This will hopefully be implemented in the near future, to deal with the needs of a greater audience whilst improving the quality of our input.

To achieve this goal, the following strategies are suggested: (1) fashion a curriculum that recognises a diverse student population; (2) seek methods to enhance inclusive engagement; (3) conceptualise engagement to prioritise meaning-making; (4) enable recognition of student identity; (5) foster critical engagement on power relations, and the politics of knowledge construction; (6) complement the generic academic literacy programme with a disciplinary approach; and last and not least, (7) develop language abilities as a resource in terms of language being a tool to convey meaning and critical engagement (Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Jacobs, 2013; Russel et al., 2020; Wilmot, 2015).

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