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Formative assessment in academic writing: Integrating online feedback within the broader teaching-learning community

Abstract

In this article a proposal is put forward for redesigning formative assessment within a particular academic literacy module, focusing on integrating a specific online writing support system within existing practices of the writing program. Formative assessment is defined as essentially open-ended and socially constructed, implemented in such a way that it makes visible the discourse based nature of academic practices. This entails broadening the conception of formative assessment as a role assigned exclusively to the lecturer to signify interactions engaged in by a range of participants within the writing community who assume active roles in the process of knowledge construction. The online feedback support system Schrijfhulp Nederlands, developed by researchers in the Instituut voor Levende Talen of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, was chosen as suitable for this purpose. Comparison of a typical example of lecturer feedback with that provided by Schrijfhulp leads to the conclusion that the two modes of feedback are compatible, both in broad categories of concern and in underlying theoretical assumptions. The proposal put forward entails a fundamental shift in which the online feedback system is used not merely as add-on, but as nexus for integrating the formative assessment practices within the writing course. Despite being rooted in a specific teaching-learning environment, the discussion contributes, in a more general sense, to the ongoing debate on best practices for assessing student writing, particularly regarding the conceptualisation of formative assessment and the best use of online writing support.

Keywords: academic writing, formative assessment, online feedback, social constructivism, information gap.

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Introduction

In an article dating from 1982 Nancy Sommers, the internationally recognised expert in writing development in the American context, reminds us that, more than any other enterprise in the teaching of writing, the task of responding to and commenting on student writing consumes the largest proportion of our time. Sommers observes that, despite the time and energy directed to this enterprise:

> ... it seems, paradoxically enough, that although commenting on student writing is the most widely used method for responding to student writing, it is the least understood. We do not know in any definitive way what constitutes thoughtful commentary or what effect, if any, our comments have on helping our students become more effective writers.
>
> (Sommers, 1982:148)

It could be argued that Sommers' position is an extreme and outdated one, especially in the light of the extensive body of research on feedback to academic writing available to us today. However, scrutiny of reports on recent studies focusing on this subject (compare, for instance: Anson & Anson, 2017; Bijami *et al.,* 2016; Cumming *et al.,* 2016; Dixon & Moxley, 2013; Fernando, 2018; Ferris, 2006; Hyland & Hyland, 2006; 2006a; Kim & Kim, 2017; Lee *et al*., 2016; Li & De Luca, 2014; Spencer, 2005; Walker, 2009; Wingate, 2012; Zhang & Hyland, 2018)) reveals that, despite improvement in certain areas, the advances made, specifically regarding actual practices, are still limited. Compare, for instance, the following taken from the opening paragraph of a research article reporting on an extensive corpus analysis of responses to student writing:

> When responding to written work, do teachers use preferred practices? Do their students learn and model those practices? Scholars from a variety of disciplines have investigated the quality and content of instructor response to writing, often concluding that instructors focus their responses on superficial "lower-order" concerns such as grammar, spelling, and wording at the expense of more complex rhetorical, structural, and meaning-based considerations. Some recent work has offered more reason for optimism, arguing that instructor response may be undergoing a "generational shift" toward higher-order considerations by virtue of scholarship in writing studies and writing-across-the curriculum initiatives./ … However, these developments have yet to influence practice across a wide variety of higher education contexts.
>
> (Anson & Anson, 2017:12)

Mastering the conventions of academic writing could be seen as one of the most vital and difficult achievements for students in entering and succeeding in the academic environment. Students write for many different purposes in many different contexts during the course of their university studies, but attention to academic writing as activity is rarely found outside the academic literacy classroom. The reason for this probably

lies in what is described in Hyland (2013:53) as "… the widespread view that writing is somehow peripheral to the more serious aspects of university life – doing research and teaching students." Hyland convincingly argues here and elsewhere (e.g. Hyland, 2009; 2011; 2012) that the accomplishment of essential social activities such as educating students, demonstrating results, disseminating ideas, and constructing knowledge relies on language, and that specialist forms of academic literacy are integral to everything we do. If the academic literacy lecturer then has to shoulder the huge responsibility of fostering students' mastery of the literacy practices required for acculturation into the university environment, evaluating and improving our practices in support of students' writing development remain important concerns.

In this article, the focus is on feedback to student writing within the teaching environment of a specific South African university. Against the backdrop of a discussion of existing views on the formative role of feedback in academic writing instruction, a definition of formative assessment is put forward which is informed by the premise of academic discourse as being essentially socially constructed in nature and integral to the key functions of academia. This entails broadening the conception of formative assessment as a role assigned exclusively to the lecturer to signify an open-ended process of interactions engaged in by a range of participants within the writing community who assume active roles in the process of knowledge construction. An important requirement for implementing this conception of formative assessment is the integration of a digital writing support system as diagnostic tool for determining the necessary interventions and interactions between members of the writing community.

Feedback in academic writing instruction

Providing feedback to student writing can take many different forms. The most common form of feedback is probably written comments provided by teachers. In its earliest form teacher commentary dates back to the end of the 19th century, amounting originally to mere correction and grading (Connors & Lunsford, 1993:201). As pointed out by Hyland and Hyland (2006) the nature of written comments has been adapted over the last two decades to suit teaching styles informed by different theoretical approaches to writing instruction, such as process theories, interactionist approaches, or genre classrooms. Furthermore, this type of feedback has gradually developed to include, or has been replaced by, other feedback practices such as peer feedback, writing workshops, oral conferences, and computer generated writing support.

Feedback to student writing is traditionally provided, generally speaking, for the purpose of either summative assessment or formative assessment. While summative assessment is important in the teaching-learning environment, the focus of this article is on creating learning experiences during the writing process, and more specifically on the integration of online writing assistance to this form of feedback. In the following two sections, therefore, formative assessment and the employment of online support as part of this type of assessment receives attention.

Feedback as formative assessment

Although the term "formative assessment" in writing instruction is generally understood as concerned with support during the ongoing learning process, a definitive definition is anything but straightforward when assessment practices and recent theoretical developments are considered (Bell & Cowie, 2001; Carless, 2007; Gikandi *et al*., 2011; Kim & Kim, 2017; Lam, 2016; Lopez-Pastor & Sicilia-Camacho, 2015; McCarthy, 2017; Turner & Purpura, 2016; Yorke, 2003; Zeng *et al*., 2018).

In the first place, a distinction between formative assessment and its counterpart, summative assessment (generally understood as the measurement of achievement for the purposes of awarding a final grade), is often blurred given different contexts and purposes of application. For instance, assessment of learning activities in completion of a particular study unit within the overall module is both formative (it assists students in mastering competencies that form the basis for learning in subsequent units) and summative (the mark reflects measurement of achievement regarding outcomes for the specific study unit). The same is true for final examinations in modules that are prerequisites for other modules within the broader curriculum.

Secondly, the use of the term "formative assessment" for assessment practices concerned with facilitating ongoing learning has been problematized in the light of recent theoretical developments. The most prominent alternative is "learning-oriented assessment" (LOA) or "learning-oriented language assessment" (LOLA), encompassing concepts such as "assessment of learning" (AoL), "assessment for learning" (AfL), and "assessment as learning" (AaL) (Carless, 2007; 2015; Lam, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2017; Zeng *et al.,* 2018). Although these approaches are all concerned with the learning process, they are informed by specific theoretical positions and tailored to reflect specific research objectives and/or assessment practices. Researchers and educators working within these paradigms may prefer, therefore, distinctions to be made between their own and other approaches. However, "formative" is still the most widely used generic descriptor of assessment done for the purpose of ongoing interventions to facilitate learning in writing, and is therefore used in this article to refer to this type of support.

Defining "formative assessment" is furthermore complicated by the wide range of assessments that can be considered as having a formative purpose. Broad categories include: written instructor feedback, oral feedback (in class, as tutorial, or as seminar), peer review, self-evaluation, portfolios, and technology-enhanced support. Within specific contexts, these broad categories take on a multitude of formats and are employed in many different combinations, and therefore definitions of a varying nature are commonly found in the literature.

In this article, I want to relate the concept "formative assessment" to the well-known, but important insight referred to above, namely that academic discourse forms the cornerstone of the key functions of the university, and to the view that this specialised form of language use is socially constructed in nature. Hyland (2009:11) comments as follows on the socially constructed nature of academic discourse:

> Social constructionism is one of the oldest and best-known approaches to conceptualizing academic discourse. Writers like Geertz (1983) and Bruffee (1986) have encouraged us to see texts as disciplinary practices; that is, writing and talk which is embedded in the activities of individuals acting as members of social groups. This moves us from focusing on the individual speaker to look at the collective. Kuhn (1970:201), for example, observes that scientific knowledge is the 'common property of a group or else nothing at all'. Academic knowledge is no longer something 'out there', but seen as a product of the situations in which it is created, rooted in disciplinary argument, affiliation and agreement-making.

The essential task of academic literacy as discipline is to support students in the process of acculturation to the academic community. In providing academic writing instruction we have to assist students in acquiring the literacies necessary to successfully participate in the practices constituting the "writing and talk which is embedded in the activities of individuals acting as members of social groups" in this community. I want to propose then, that formative assessment needs to be conceived of in such a way that it makes visible the discourse-based, socially constructed nature of academic practices. This means that the assessment process needs to be fundamentally flexible and open-ended, with a variety of possible roles determined and performed by the parties involved in the teaching-learning environment.

In providing an example of how this conception of formative assessment could be implemented, I want to draw on the existing approach within the environment in which I teach, namely the writing course that forms the focus of the academic literacy module at my university. The proposed assessment process, set out in more detail further on, involves as essential component the incorporation of a digital writing support system for providing feedback to students' writing.

Online feedback and formative assessment

Globally computer technology is increasingly used as part of the teaching-learning environment in higher education, including in courses concerned with developing students' academic literacies. This type of support takes on a variety of forms, such as: online learning platforms provided by universities, Learning Management Systems such as *Moodle* or *Blackboard*, applications of informal social network sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter,* as well as blogs, wikis, e-portfolios, and online discussion forums. Online support is also offered in contexts ranging from fully-fledged semester or year courses to short workshops lasting only weeks, or in some cases a few days. A wide variety of combinations of in-class and online teaching and learning also exists, involving the full spectrum of student types and educational environments typically found in higher education as well as in pre-university settings.

In the literature reporting on the use of online feedback for formative assessment of academic writing (compare, for instance: Bailie-de Byl, 2004; Burstein *et al*., 2004; El

Ebyary & Windeatt, 2010; Fernando, 2018; Laflen & Smith, 2017; McCarthy, 2017; Wingate & Dreiss, 2009; Zhang & Hyland, 2018) several advantages are highlighted. Researchers point out that in the contemporary higher learning environment characterised by large student numbers, online interventions make it possible to reduce the workload of teaching staff, enabling them to provide timely feedback, and increase the frequency of assessments and the range of assessed skills. Compared to face-to-face instruction in traditional classroom settings, electronic support is regarded to offer greater possibilities for creating a more stimulating learning environment with the potential to offer flexible learning opportunities tailored to suit the needs and learning preferences of contemporary, heterogeneous student populations. In an electronic environment, it is also easier to make available a wide selection of materials and tasks as part of the feedback aimed at creating learning opportunities. Such materials can be updated easily, can be provided at low cost, and students can use them independently at their own pace. Additional advantageous qualities of feedback provided by computerised tools are their standardised nature, the potential for integration with existing assessment strategies in the physical teaching-learning environment, and greater ease of collaboration between students and their tutors as well as their peers.

Despite advantages of this nature, a number of disadvantages are also recorded in reports on studies focusing on online formative feedback in academic writing. Very often online interventions are developed for use only in specific disciplines, or suited to specific course types. Furthermore, these interventions are often too short in duration to render generalizable results. Experts in academic writing generally agree that online tools can serve only an introductory function or provide only limited help with specific elements of the writing process, and that additional support is required for students to become literate in their disciplines. The availability of computerised support can also temp tutors to shirk their responsibilities in assisting students' developing capacities. Novice writers are often found to have difficulties in implementing the type of feedback provided by online tools successfully for improvement of their own writing. In some instances learning is hampered and students experience anxiety in using online tools due to a lack of computer skills. Some studies report that students are dissatisfied with grades awarded by software instead of the instructor, and with both the accuracy and clarity of the feedback provided.

While there is general consensus that online formative support in academic writing has been well-established and constitutes, when properly utilised, a powerful resource, it is also clear that this mode of intervention should be used with care and with, as first concern, the needs of the students involved and the practicalities of the particular teaching-learning environment.

Creating an integrated writing community

At the North-West University, a South African institution of higher education, support in academic literacy is provided in all qualifications. An introductory course is followed

by weaker students as identified by the Test for Academic Literacy Levels (Van Dyk, 2005; Weideman, 2003; 2011) written by all first year students soon after arrival on campus. A more advanced, course, *Academic literacy development*, is a compulsory requirement for graduating at this university. This more advanced course is essentially a writing course, taught by ten full-time and four part-time lecturers to, give or take, five thousand students per year. To this number should be added a fast growing group of distance students, which means that providing timely, frequent and valuable formative assessment is a major challenge.

Utilising an online support system for providing feedback during the different phases of the writing done in the course of the semester may be a solution, and provisional steps in this direction have been taken recently. As part of a broader initiative to restructure our curriculum and develop new instructional material, we evaluated different writing support systems. *Schrijfhulp Nederlands,* developed by researchers in the Instituut voor Levende Talen of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven was, for different reasons, chosen as suitable for our purposes. One of the reasons why this system was decided upon is that the developers of *Schrijfhulp Nederlands* are in the process of testing and refining their support system, and for this purpose made an English version[1] available to some South African universities for evaluation. Opportunities for working together with other institutions of higher education to improve teaching and learning are always welcome, but in practice they do not come along very often. Having the *Schrijfhulp* writing support system available for evaluation, with the possibility of shared future utilisation is, therefore, a rather rare and welcome circumstance. Given the pressures of providing formative feedback in my own teaching environment as explained earlier, the implementation of an online feedback facility is not only an interesting option, but indeed an urgent need. Apart from the potential to reduce the workload of teaching staff, introducing online feedback would change the dynamics of the writing course and would make it possible to rethink our existing assessment practices.

The writing course

The module *Academic literacy development* at the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University is a semester course stretching over roughly 13 weeks, with one and a half hours contact teaching time per week. The broad outcomes for the module are to enable students to:

- become part of, and participate successfully in the academic community;
- access information in a responsible and ethical way in order to write an academic text;

1 A new version of the writing support system in English, *Academic Writing Assistant* (AWA) is in the process of development. For the analysis referred to in this article the older version of the English support system was used.

- process information strategically in order to write an academic text; and produce an academic text.

These outcomes testify to academic writing as the primary concern and as central to accomplishing the overarching aim of acculturation to the academic community. The outcomes also reflect the theoretical framework of the course, namely the Information Gap Theory, grounded on the principle of collaboration as essential characteristic of any successful communicative situation, and on the realization that the creation of knowledge entails finding, processing, and producing information through language as medium (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Loewenstein, 1994; Waltz, 1996; Weideman, 2017:104-128).

Students are set the task to write an argumentative academic essay of about 1000 words on a prescribed topic. The prescribed topics concern issues of general interest, but are formulated in such a way that the construction of a sound academic argument, applied to students' field of study and future professions, is foregrounded.

A process approach is followed in the writing program. Students have to complete three versions of the essay. In the first version students work on their own, present only their own ideas on the prescribed topic, and have to focus on developing an appropriate macrostructure (introduction, body, conclusion) for the essay, on academic language usage, and on adhering to the technical requirements set for a computer generated text. Although this version of the essay comprises only 300 words, the basic elements constituting an argument (thesis, supporting data, logical conclusion) must be in place. Following a discussion of the topic, the students start the writing, usually in the form of pre-writing activities, in class and complete a first draft outside class. Using a detailed marking scheme, students provide feedback to their peers' writing in class. This feedback has to be taken into account for the final editing before submitting the essay for marking and feedback by the lecturer. In writing the second and third versions of the essay, which are further developed versions of the basic essay completed individually, students work together in groups of three to five. In version two the focus is on refining the argument structure, integrating information from sources in support of the argument presented, developing a discipline specific focus, and on referencing and recording bibliographic information for sources used. In the final stage of the writing the focus is on text editing based on feedback provided by the lecturer.

The digital writing support system

In comparing *Schrijfhulp Nederlands* to other tools providing online support in writing De Wachter *et al.* (2016:50) single out two characteristics of their system which are of particular importance in considering its suitability for the needs of our students. In the first place, the system is particularly user friendly in the sense that the user can submit the entire text for feedback, have to do so only once for receiving feedback on different aspects of the text, and that the feedback is provided in a clear, simple format. A second important characteristic of the support provided by *Schrijfhulp Nederlands* is that the

autonomy of the writer is respected. The *Schrijfhulp Nederlands* system is devised not to make corrections. Instead, the text is marked for problematic aspects and feedback is provided in the form of general information, advice regarding good writing practices, and concrete examples. The aim is thus to raise awareness about problematic aspects of the writing, leaving the discretion to make changes or not, to the author. A common problem of online marking tools is that feedback provided is prescriptive in nature, so that the writer's sense of autonomy and of taking responsibility for their own writing is diminished. Such a prescriptive approach also means that the focus is on the final product, which may cause the writer to lose sight of the importance of writing as a process.

Assistance provided after uploading the text on the *Schrijfhulp* platform comprises two main categories, namely text editing and text enrichment. The rubric *text editing* provides feedback on coherence and cohesion, academic style, and language usage. Feedback on coherence and cohesion includes: general information, such as the number of words, sentences and paragraphs, and the length of sentences and paragraphs; an indication of complexity regarding qualities such as word frequency and readability, keeping in mind text genre; the use of discourse markers; and an indication of recurring words and patterns within the text. Feedback on style highlights the use of formal/informal words, vague words, archaic words, the passive form, nominalisations, personal language, and prolixity. Aspects of language usage such as spelling, vocabulary, common grammar, and tense use also receive attention. Additional information on the different aspects of writing is provided in the form of notes at the top of the screen, which includes links to more detailed information in, for example, reference sources, grammars, and word lists.

Under the rubric *text enrichment* the writer can look up the meanings of words used in the text and choose alternatives from a word list suitable for use in an academic environment. The writer can also check the suitability of words used within a particular context, determine suitable word combinations (e.g. which verb or adjective combines frequently with a particular noun). The text enrichment environment also provides a variety of links to websites and other electronic language and writing resources.

Compatibility of **Schrijfhulp Nederlands** and the writing course

For the purpose of evaluating the suitability of the feedback provided by *Schrijfhulp* in terms of the type of support students need for reaching the outcomes of the writing course, written lecturer feedback on a corpus of 30 first year essays, has been recorded and analysed. A summary of the results of this analysis is presented in *Table 1* below. The first year essays have been selected randomly from work submitted as part of the writing program of the module *Academic literacy development* by first year students registered in a variety of disciplines[2]. Although the feedback was provided by one

2 The texts form part of the learner corpus in the process of development as part of the inter-institutional ICELDA-project for the "Development, refinement and implementation of an online academic writing tool linked to a learner corpus of academic writing" funded by the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR). Ethical clearance for utilising these texts for research purposes has been obtained as part of the registration process of this project.

lecturer only, this was done on the basis of a detailed marking scheme agreed on and used by all lecturers involved in teaching the writing course. Standardisation of feedback and grading is also ensured by moderation of the marked essays. The summary gives an indication of frequently recurring writing problems, and is given, not in the original wording of the lecturer, but "translated" into linguistic terms and/or to reflect assessment criteria provided to students in the form of guidelines and requirements for the written assignment.

Table 1: Typical writing problems as reflected by written lecturer feedback

Coherence and cohesion
• Headings missing, not numbered
• Subheadings missing
• Linking words, phrases missing or superfluous
• Information repeated
• Headings too vague – do not help in highlighting flow of essay
• Headings need to be reformulated to capture content of sections to follow and to aid flow of text/guide reader
• Reference of pronoun unclear
• Sections of text given in bullet form
• Reporting words missing: (e.g. *according to*)
• Introduction divided into numbered subsections
• Paragraphs need to be reorganised to aid flow of logic
• Information provided within paragraphs needs to be reorganised
Argument structure
• Content of sections should be rearranged for proper structuring of argument
• Essay contains most of the elements of an argument but some of these are given under the wrong headings
• Elements of the argument are not linked properly and therefore it becomes difficult to understand the logical flow
• Essay as a whole needs restructuring to form a coherent argument
• Support for thesis not developed properly
• Headings in body of essay do not reflect the focus of what follows in particular section
• No identifiable introduction – i.e. no problem statement, thesis, preview
• Introductory section contains problem statement, thesis and preview, but is not identified as "Introduction"

- Introduction lacks background and/or problem statement and/or preview of main points of discussion
- Problem statement provided in the introductory section should be made more explicit
- Preview provided in introduction, but problematic (e.g. does not reflect the correct sequence of sections to follow, or identifies only some of the significant elements to follow)
- No final conclusion provided in concluding section
- Conclusion not linked to thesis, problem statement
- Main points of discussion not marked by headings in body of essay
- No counter argument provided and this element is therefore also missing form conclusion
- Counter argument not substantial enough or part thereof not suitable for this purpose
- Points of support and opposition not summarised in conclusion
- Serious problems with formulation, impacting negatively on the flow of argument

Academic style

- Incomplete sentences (e.g. sms style of writing)
- Writing is lacking in voice, i.e. no appropriate hedging/boosting (especially in introductions and conclusions), over or under use of self-mentioning, absence of strategies for engaging the reader
- Unattended reference
- Informality: conversational style, contractions, informal expressions (slang)

Use of sources

- Problems in style (format) of text references and reference list.
- Text references to secondary sources not given in correct format and/or not handled correctly in reference list
- Insufficient references (content taken from sources not identified as such)
- Number or type of sources not according to requirements set for assignment
- Refer to sources which do not appear in reference list
- No references to prescribed source set for the assignment
- Sections of text consist mainly of ideas copied from sources without any references
- No reference list
- Reference list incomplete

• Bibliographic information for sources provided in the text does do not correlate with information provided in bibliography • Summaries, sections of text from sources loosely strung together without integration • Information in direct quotations not correct according to source
Language usage
• Spelling: common errors; upper and lower case used incorrectly; lower case used at the beginning of sentences; possessive form • Concord • Typing errors • Punctuation: commas absent after linking words, in long sentences, in lists of enumerated items; incorrect use of comma before and after parenthesis; semi-colon used where comma is needed; full stops absent at end of sentences; punctuation used after headings; • Formulation problems • Prepositions: unnecessary; not properly suitable • Articles omitted; superfluous; used incorrectly • Vocabulary: words unsuited to context of sentence • Sentence structure: words and other necessary elements (subject, verbs, referencing words) lacking; run on sentences; fragments; text with subordinate clause structure presented as sentence • Singular used instead of plural and vice versa (e.g. this key revolutions) • Wrong word class within context of the sentence (e.g. adjective instead of adverb; verb instead of adjective; noun instead of verb) • Collocations: elements missing; used incorrectly within context • Verbs: omitted; infinitive, modal verbs specifically problematic • Incomplete use of the comparative • Incorrect use of pronouns

In comparing the written lecturer feedback summarized above with that provided by the *Schrijfhulp* system according to the rubrics of feedback as described above, it is obvious that, for the most part, there is an overlap in the broad categories that receive attention. Both forms of feedback focus on coherence and cohesion, language usage, and style. In the lecturer feedback, more attention is paid to (1) the argument structure of the essay, (2) the use of sources in support of the argument presented, and (3) application of the argument to the field of study of the student. Emphasis on these aspects of writing in the lecturer feedback corresponds to the foregrounding of the construction of a sound academic argument in the writing program. *Schrijfhulp* aims at providing academic writing support of a more generic nature. From a closer scrutiny of feedback provided for

specific essays it is evident, however, that in cases where argument structure is identified as a specific problem by the lecturer, this corresponds with text elements highlighted in the online feedback pointing towards underdeveloped coherence and cohesion of the text. In other words, both types of feedback identify, in their own terms, the logical flow of the text as an aspect that needs attention.

A second shared element of the two types of feedback is safeguarding autonomy of the writer. In providing feedback on language usage, the lecturer does not make corrections, but underlines problematic words, phrases, or sentences and identifies the grammatical problem by means of a set of codes explained in a marking key made available to the students. In some cases students are referred to course material or reference sources for more information. In the case of macro-structural elements of the text such as argument structure, coherence, or source integration, a combination of comments and symbols (such as crosses, ticks, question marks, lines and arrows) are used to signal approval or indicate the need for adaptation. At the end of the essay a more extended comment is often provided, drawing together different issues identified in the course of the essay. References to sources of information on writing principles, and encouragements to discuss the feedback with the lecturer and/or make use of other forms of support (e.g. the Writing Laboratory) are often included in the comments. Ultimately, students have make the necessary changes themselves. That this responsibility remains with the student is important, keeping in mind the guiding principle of the course, namely that learning involves bridging an information gap in which instruction is aimed at enabling students to gain knowledge and understanding which will lead to the creation of new knowledge. This principle also informs the conception of writing as a process, reflected in lecturer feedback formulated as information to be used in creating an improved version of the text. The importance of the students' implementation of feedback to this end is underlined by the requirement that the marked version of the essay has to be submitted together with the new version. The mark awarded for the final version is based primarily on the extent to which students realised the lecturer's feedback for further development of their texts. As explained earlier, respect for the autonomy of the writer and a focus on the writing process are founding principles of the *Schrijfhulp* system, which means that the support provided will help to reinforce the underlying ethos framing the teaching practices of our writing program.

Integrating online feedback within the broader writing community

Comparing a typical example of lecturer feedback with that provided by *Schrijfhulp* makes it clear that the two modes of feedback are compatible regarding both broad categories of concern and underlying theoretical assumptions. It seems, therefore, that the possibility of adding *Schrijfhulp* to the existing practices of formative assessment within our writing course would be of value both from a teaching and a learning perspective. This is, however, not the full extent of the argument I want to put forward. Adding an online feedback facility to the existing assessment practices of the academic literacy module would indeed be of value, but would amount to passing up an opportunity for innovation. I would, therefore, like to propose a more fundamental shift in which the

online feedback system is used not merely as add-on, but as nexus for integrating the formative assessment practices within the writing course.

Within the specific environment of the academic literacy module concerned, a range of resources are available for providing support in the development of literacies in academic writing. This includes:

- formally scheduled contact lecture time of 90 minutes per week on average;
- a group of highly qualified and experienced teaching staff;
- teaching material (such as a workbook, exercises and memoranda, a commonly contributed to and shared data bank of electronic teaching aids such as tests, PowerPoint slides, videos);
- instruments for assessment (tests, marking rubrics, guidelines for written assignments) developed by experts teaching the module;
- an online learning platform (*eFundi*);
- a Writing Laboratory offering free writing support to all students; and
- a well-appointed library offering, in addition to books, journals, and other source types, also specialist support in the form of group sessions for accessing and processing source material.

Resources such as these have the potential to be utilised as tools for formative assessment, and for most part are already used as such. Taking as departure the definition of formative assessment proposed earlier in this article, what needs to be done is to link together the available resources in a system which is essentially flexible and open-ended, and in which the discourse-based, socially constructed nature of academic practices are foregrounded. In practical terms, my proposal that *Schrijfhulp* becomes the nexus of the formative assessment design, means that this system is used as a primary diagnostic tool, the first environment where students submit their writing. Because of the online nature of the feedback it can be easily accessed by different participants within the teaching-learning environment such as lecturers, students, Writing Laboratory consultants, and librarians. Using the online feedback as point of departure, the interventions needed to facilitate learning, as well as the way in which available resources can be employed to this effect, will then be determined between the different participants within the teaching-learning environment, conceived of as constituting a writing community. This type of community should embody what Weideman (2017:104) sees as the acid test for a communicative paradigm in applied linguistic design, namely that learning is conceptualized as tasks facilitating the bridging of an information gap:

> An information gap task is invariably based on the principle of language user A knowing something that B does not know; furthermore, that A (after perhaps being requested by B) must tell or inform B, or direct and instruct him/her, or

> explain, or do whatever is appropriate in the situation so that B may also know, understand, act, and so forth. An information gap presupposes that there are at least two parties involved in the language process, not only as speakers and interlocutors, but also as writers and readers, and in a variety of possible lingual roles, such as buyer and seller, or provider and user, or entertainer and entertained, and so forth. In the type of teaching exercise that proceeds from this premise lingual expression is elevated to the level of authentic communication, with those participating as language users taking on potentially multiple roles.

Although the lecturer, in the role of language user A, has the responsibility of creating the instructional context to facilitate this co-construction of knowledge, this role is not exclusively reserved for him/her. Anyone within the writing community can potentially assume any of the multiple roles (such as: inform/receive, instruct/act, explain/understand) necessary for the construction of knowledge. Applied to the formative assessment scenario proposed above, this means, for instance, that once the first draft of student writing has been submitted for online feedback, students should assume the role of language user A in the sense that they, as owners of the text, know what they do not understand, what information they need, why they succeeded of failed to reach a specific outcome, and so forth. Students, therefore, should take on the responsibility to find the information they need by informing, explaining, and asking questions in order to help language user B (lecturer, peers, Writing Laboratory consultant, librarian) understand what they need to improve their texts.

An important sense in which students have to assume the role of language user A is with regard to knowledge of the content and preferred discourse practices of their own disciplines. The parties acting traditionally in the role of language user A (lecturers, consultants, librarians) will probably take the initiative in raising students' awareness of the importance of developing a discipline-specific voice in their academic writing. The students are, however, the experts, possessing knowledge of the discourse practices of their own disciplines, which the academic literacy facilitators probably lack. Drawing on this knowledge in foregrounding the particular form of specialist literacy students have to become acculturated to, and guiding them to assume responsibility for ongoing growth in this process, is essential. Becoming active participants in negotiating support from other participants in the writing community in finding, processing and producing new knowledge will hopefully assist in making visible the essentially discourse-based, socially constructed nature of academic practices in a broader sense. If we succeed in facilitating this type of transfer, it would mean that all our assessment practices become formative in nature, in other words, that they are not the end purpose of a learning process, but essential first steps for fostering further learning.

In conclusion, it is necessary to point out that, as basis for the type of formative assessment design proposed here, further development of certain aspects of the *Schrijfhulp* support system is necessary. For instance, for the purpose of text enrichment, resources created specifically for supporting students in reaching the outcomes the module *Academic literacy development*, as well as reference works suited to the South African context need to be linked in addition to what exist already. Of more importance

is the fact that the range and nature of the feedback provided in the existing system is informed by a needs analysis of student writing at KU Leuven, and, although there are probably many correspondences, student populations vary across different language and institutional contexts. An important existing initiative for broadening the empirical basis for the general nature of feedback provided and specifically for adaptations to suit the needs of South African students is the inter-institutional ICELDA-project for the "Development, refinement and implementation of an online academic writing tool linked to a learner corpus of academic writing" funded by the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR). The main aim of this project is to compile and annotate a multi-genre, multi-level learner corpus of academic writing of students at different South African universities in English (which will serve as template to be used for other languages in separate projects). This corpus will be used for refining, finalising and piloting the *Schrijfhulp* online feedback system in the South African context.

Conclusion

This article concerns redesigning the formative assessment practices within a particular teaching-learning environment, focusing on integrating a specific online writing support system within this context. However, I would like to believe that the discussion contributes, in a more general sense, to the ongoing debate on best practices of assessment of student writing. The conception of formative assessment proposed here, namely as an open-ended system, co-constructed by members of the writing community, could be implemented as design principle within courses concerned with development of academic literacies, and in the broader applied linguistics paradigm of communicative language teaching. The importance of integrating online feedback support within existing practices of the teaching-learning community as proposed here could also assist in both strengthening the advantages and counteracting the disadvantages of this mode of intervention as recorded in existing studies.

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