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DOI: https://doi.org/10.38140/pie.v41i3.7291

e-ISSN 2519-593X
Perspectives in Education
2023 41(3): 77-94

PUBLISHED:
29 September 2023

RECEIVED:
29 April 2023

ACCEPTED:
25 August 2023

Course correction: The role of reflective writing assessment in a post-pandemic academic literacy course

Abstract

In this conceptual paper, borne from the experiences of two academic literacy lecturers at the NWU, we ask, regarding elements of assessment, how we can sensibly adapt an intervention-style writing course in a post-Covid-19 higher education context. We propose a course correction model, applicable to academic literacy writing courses, to address the pedagogical lacunae highlighted in a pre-pandemic context and compounded in the post-pandemic higher education context. We argue for the adaption of this writing course to contend with the under-preparedness of students for higher education, the issue of online learning and resultant student cognitive overload and additional challenges, such as the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) and its effects on teaching and learning, and specifically writing courses.

An important element which needs to be reconceptualised within the context of our compounded problem, is that of the writing assessment. In this paper we argue for moving away from placing major emphasis on assessing the final product of writing and shifting some focus to the pedagogical value of examining the student's journey of writing. We therefore propose incorporating reflective writing as a significant element of assessment through our reflect-rewrite-*model. The goal of this proposed model is to create a space for fostering student self-awareness, responsibility, critical thinking, and evaluation skills. Such outcomes should then contribute to the creation of effective and contextually relevant, academic skills development, which in turn should positively influence student success and mitigate some of the issues currently experienced in the module offering.*

Keywords: *Academic literacy, reflection, writing, assessment, post-pandemic*

Published by the UFS
http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/pie

1. Introduction

South Africa has seen major increases in student enrolment at tertiary institutions since the rise of democracy in 1994 (Mentz, 2012), and the government plans to increase the number even further by 2030 (NPC, 2020), creating at least an additional 650 000 student placements within this timeframe (USAf, 2022). Although this drive to provide

access to tertiary education to all South Africans is admirable as a means of social justice, the access that is granted to these students does not necessarily result in the successful completion of a degree. USAf (2022: 7) concludes that the current throughput rate for university students in South Africa is a mere 60%, and admits that the National Development Plan (NDP) goal of a 75% throughput rate is a "strenuous target". Tewari and Illesanmi (2020) sum it up aptly when they state that South Africa has achieved access of education, but it is failing (miserably) at success. A pertinent question to ask therefore is, if the access goal is achieved, what is hampering the translation of this access into student success?

Cliff, Yeld and Hanslo (2003: 1-2) refer to the factors that influence academic success as "a blend of cognitive, affective, motivational, socio-cultural, economic and institutional variables". Therefore, the answer to the question is interwoven with a complicated web of societal, financial, governmental and institutional challenges and failures. This article focuses on one particular aspect within this web, the mismatch between the level of preparedness (emotional and academic) reached by a student entering tertiary education, and the level that is required to succeed; in other words, the "acculturation gap" (Sebolai, 2022: 2). More specifically, it focuses on the role (and design) of fundamental support modules used as an intervention strategy to bridge the gap between secondary and tertiary education and prepare, support and facilitate student success.

However, a number of challenges can be identified that contribute to impeding this goal. From an experiential perspective, these challenges form an interdependent triangle, which we call *the triangular challenge model*, consisting of the following elements: firstly, operational challenges such as increased student-to-staff ratios; secondly, the ability and preparedness of students; and thirdly, the design of support modules. Together these elements create obstacles to both staff and students, especially in complex and dynamic education contexts. While teaching staff, such as the authors of this paper, cannot address numbers one and two of this triangle, they can indeed attempt to create more favourable conditions for student success by the reconceptualisation of support module design and approaches to reflect the current societal and educational context in which they have to operate better.

One element that the authors believe could be reconsidered is that of academic writing, which is addressed by the North-West University (NWU) as part of a compulsory support module in the first year of study (Academic Literacy Development or ALDE 122). In particular, the authors believe that the reconceptualisation of the final writing assessment to include a focus on self-reflection, critical evaluation and writing awareness could mitigate much of the strain experienced by both staff and students due to the triangular challenge model.

2. The triangular challenge model

A widely acknowledged contributor to student success rates, the student-to-staff ratio, becomes even more strained in a South African context when taking into consideration the push for access. This is especially true in large student groups, often found in the compulsory foundational modules aimed at improving student success, such as academic literacy modules. At the North-West University (NWU), such modules (ALDE 111 and ALDE 112/122) are compulsory for all enrolled first-year students and thus directly impact student-to-staff ratio challenges.

From the research (McDonald, 2013; Dhunpath & Subbaye, 2018; O'Brien *et al*., 2020) we know that a lower student-to-staff ratio results in a more efficient teaching and learning

experience. Despite this, an ideal or even close to ideal ratio is not realised as the norm at South African universities. For example, in the *Staffing South Africa's Universities Framework* (DHET, 2012: 8) it is clearly stated that

> improved student: staff ratios lead to an increase in quality, throughput and success in the system, and that the current average student: staff ratio is inadequate for the kinds of measures that are necessary to meet the needs of the majority of students currently being admitted to higher education studies.

Addressing these decade-old concerns, Cloete, Bunting and Van Schalkwyk (2022) comment on the "ambiguous picture of academic staffing levels in the South African public university system", and state that "no firm answers can be given to questions about the understaffing of South Africa's public universities". However, from an experiential perspective of staff on the ground, the picture is very much clear.

If we take into account that the ideal student-to-staff ratio at university level is projected to be around 26:1 (Hlengwa, 2019), this leaves a myriad of questions with regard to support modules, which can be argued in a South African context as fundamentally important to the success of our students. In the department where the authors work, for example, student numbers for the specific module discussed in this paper have risen from 883 to 2 294 between the years 2010 and 2023. That equates to a 159% increase in the number of students – an increase not reflected in permanent staff appointments. Throughout the same period of time, lecturer numbers have fluctuated, but on average a student-to-staff ratio remained at about 200:1. This ratio has never been higher than it is now in 2023. When researchers start arguing that student success at South African universities is largely dependent on quality input from lecturers and that this is sorely lacking (Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020), one must ask where we are going wrong? If institutional and governmental support is not forthcoming in the way of reducing student-to-staff ratios, then an option would be to implement alternative ways of teaching and assessing specifically tailored to address the unique challenges of the post-Covid-19 South African Higher Education student.

A second factor impacting student success is that of the seemingly insurmountable and ever-increasing acculturation gap that exists when students enter tertiary education (Koo, Baker & Yoon, 2021; Dhunpath & Subbaye, 2018; Ajani & Akinyele, 2014; CHE, 2013; Letseka 2005; Badat, 2009; Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). While this is a universal problem in higher education, it is also one that has unique challenges in South Africa. In fact,

> dropout rates continue to rise across a broad spectrum of school achievement, and lecturers increasingly cite students' inabilities to read and write in a critical and analytical manner, to discern between fact and opinion, to recognise what is deemed evidence for an argument and to grasp the discourse of the discipline - in essence, academic illiteracy – as central to the problem (Van Schalkwyk, 2008: 2).

This same sentiment is echoed 12 years later when Tewari and Ilesanmi (2020: 2) comment on the need for the South African higher education sector to realise that high school learners are still underprepared for university studies, and that radical changes to "upgrade their skills to contend [with] higher education learning" are needed. Although intervention strategies such as the academic literacy support module offerings are a step in the right direction, it is important to ensure that this upgrading of skills remains relevant to the context. Redesigning such academic literacy modules to include assessments that reflect radically changed contexts are crucial if issues that inhibit student success are to be addressed successfully.

3. The compounding effect caused by the pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the issues as highlighted in the triangular challenge model were magnified. Three elements contributed to this problem. Firstly, the crisis forced students to rely even more heavily on reading (one of the key elements of academic literacy), due to large amounts of text placed on LMS platforms as a result of an immediate contingency teaching plan. This is problematic, because reading is specified as one of the most significant skills required at tertiary level (Rose *et al.*, 2008), and unfortunately one with which South African students particularly struggle. Pretorius (2002: 193) states that: "[r]eading constitutes the very process whereby learning occurs and it lies at the roots of academic performance: if one wishes to improve academic performance at all levels of schooling, then one needs to improve reading ability". However, if the research confirming reading as a weak point of South African students is considered (Pretorius 2000; Van Dyk, Van der Poel & Van der Silk, 2013; Millin, 2015; Spaull & Pretorius, 2019), it is essential to consider the implications of additional reading, especially in the context of autonomous learning during the first year. While the reading burden was clearly evident during the pandemic-context for students completing the academic literacy modules discussed in this paper, there has not been much change in a post-pandemic context. These modules are still presented as hybrid modules, presupposing an increased student reliance on reading.

Secondly, the pandemic context highlighted the social inequalities and the technological gap facing students in South Africa. An analysis by the Southern Universities Network (Clements, 2020) reports that limited internet access impacts about a third of their students and predicts similar patterns across the country. Rainford (2021) also mentions that national data on broad-band coverage demonstrate that even if households do have broadband connections, they may be of limited speed and have financial implications, which can further limit access. Again, these issues persist in an education context where hybrid teaching relies heavily on technological support and access.

Thirdly, the pandemic largely eliminated the social process of learning. Learning not only takes place in formal settings like lecture halls, but also in informal settings though interactions with peers. In relation to this, universities were cautioned against the 'embrace online or perish' syndrome in response to the Covid-19 crisis, as this was not necessarily the best approach. Although one can understand the need for the more effective use of technology in teaching and learning, and the inevitability of emergency teaching via remote and technology-based platforms, universities are, by their very nature, places of engagement, debates and the exchange of a plurality of ideas – an activity that best plays out face-to-face and in physical spaces. If higher education institutions only function online, they will not be able to fulfil the function of nation-building and the socialisation and acculturation of new generations of scholars (USAf, 2019). Although we now find ourselves in a post-pandemic context, hybrid teaching strategies are still used, and the remnants of the 'embrace online or perish' approach is still clearly visible from an experiential perspective.

4. Resultant potential effects on the student learning experience

From the compounded issues discussed in the preceding section, the authors, as lecturers of foundation modules, perceived students to experience significant challenges in terms of efficient academic engagement in these modules. Students experienced severe cognitive overload, not only from the excessive amounts of content reading that were expected of

them, but also due to a video conferencing fatigue, as outlined by Bailenson (2021). From the experience of the authors teaching over the past three years, it would seem that the overload, coupled with the expectation in many instances of almost completely autonomous learning, created the ideal conditions for students to take 'academic shortcuts'. In this specific case the authors refer to the temptation of plagiarising in a writing course as an academic shortcut. Not only is this temptation problematic in an autonomous environment, but the technological advancement of AI technology (like ChatGPT) that can be trained to generate original, natural-sounding texts based on prompts further complicates teaching and learning of, specifically, academic writing courses like ALDE122.

Despite many studies advocating the revision of plagiarism guidelines and policies at universities, and the actual implementation of these, high levels of plagiarism in student writing can still be seen. From Walker's (1998) global outcry: "What are we doing about students' plagiarism at universities?", to Stander's (2020: 156) attempt at outlining "additional intervention strategies" that need to be implemented to combat South African students plagiarising, the issue of plagiarism at university seems global, perpetual and, it seems, our strategies are still falling short in 2023. The problem at the root of the *plagedemic1* outlined by most scholars seems to involve the general lack of knowledge about what constitutes plagiarism. This issue is bound to become more complex with the development of AI that can generate text. Nwosu and Chukwuere (2020) confront the issue in the context of online learning in South Africa, and propose policy recommendations to mitigate plagiarism. They propose that:

1. Students and any content generators (writers and lecturers) should be educated and informed of the consequences of plagiarism.
2. Students should be taught how to reference properly in any form of assessment.
3. Higher education institutions should provide a mandatory module covering plagiarism for students to be informed.
4. Departments of education and other education agents should come up with a plagiarism policy to regulate and enforce plagiarism consciousness.
5. Every higher education institution should implement a technological platform to monitor students, and even lecturers' submitted assessments and manuscripts. (Nwosu & Chukuwere, 2020: 14685).

While these strategies are admirable, they fail to provide practical tactics for teachers 'on the ground' and rather work on the policy level, because they provide broad outlines of strategies that have already been applied and still yield high levels of student plagiarism. Stander (2020), on the other hand, delves into practical strategies such as translation and paraphrasing to help students avoid plagiarism from the point of comprehension. She admits that while translation strategies seem successful, lecturers "need to apply explicit and diverse intervention strategies and measures to help students avoid plagiarism" (Stander, 2020: 166). These strategies find their home in the academic literacy modules offered by universities, but only if they are rethought and reconceptualised to address the new and relevant issues related to plagiarism.

1 The term 'plagedemic' is coined by the authors of this article to describe the endemic state of plagiarism in academic writing and university contexts.

Against the backdrop of South Africa achieving a high level of academic access for learners but not yet academic success, and the students' experiences of the compounding effect that the pandemic has had on this situation, how important is the role of a foundation module, such as Academic Literacy Development? Most universities have put various methods of support or intervention strategies in place to ensure student success, focusing predominantly on strategies such as academic literacy support modules (Butler, 2013). More recently, innovations such as the Student Affairs and Student Success (SASS) capacity development programme initiated by USAf closely aligns the rationale of success with institutional support (USAf, 2023).

Important to note in any discussion on South African student success is the link between language, academic literacy programmes and academic performance as a factor in tertiary academic success, as discussed in a landmark study by Van Rooy and Coetzee Van-Rooy (2015). From their findings it is clear that it is not per se language skills, but rather how students performed overall in high school "which is the stronger predictor of academic achievement" (Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015: 42). Probably the most important finding from their study, however, is the fact that "achievement in university academic literacy modules was the strongest predictor of academic success in the first and second year at university" (Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015: 42). A finding like this indicates the severity of responsibility placed at the feet of these 'support' modules in their role as facilitators of success. Petersen, Louw and Dumont (2009: 100) argue that the academic success of many South African students depends on factors such as adjustment, academic performance, help seeking, academic motivation and self-esteem, and intervention modules like academic literacy Development are geared towards helping students to adjust and close the acculturation gap. It is therefore vital that these modules are continually adapted to provide the best possible foundation for the current cohort of university students, taking into consideration the higher education context. In a changing teaching and learning environment, it is also vital for us to ask then to what the 'best possible foundation' in fact amounts.

5. The way forward

The elements hampering student success, as discussed here, brought about by both the unique nature of the pandemic and global and local responses to it, compounding already-existing problems in the education landscape of South Africa, contributed to the need for the re-evaluation of our academic support offering. The authors argue that a significantly compounded problem must be addressed, and in a writing course, specifically, it is vital to rethink our approach of academic literacy development modules offered as an intervention strategy to support first-year students.

An important element which needs to be reconceptualised within the context of our problem is that of the writing assessment. Therefore, in this article the authors want to make a case for moving away from placing major emphasis on assessing the final product of essay writing, and shifting some focus to the pedagogical value of self-perception, writing awareness and critical evaluation – thus the student's reflective experience of the writing process and their expression thereof. The authors therefore propose incorporating reflective writing as a significant element of assessment through our *reflect-rewrite-model*. This proposed model is an amalgamation of the pre-Covid-19 and Emergency remote online teaching (EROT) teaching modules followed and therefore a discussion of both these models is warranted.

6. The pre-Covid-19 Academic Literacy (AL) model

Due to the acculturation gap experienced by students entering university, many South African universities offer support to students in an attempt to address the issue. Universities, however, approach their intervention strategies for academic success differently. Some take a longer-term approach, extending their academic literacy module over an entire year like the University of the Free State (UFS), or even over the first two years of study like the Vaal University of Technology (VUT). Many, including the NWU, offer discipline-specific support modules to prepare students within their field of study. According to Sebolai (2022:3) "the discipline-specific approach is currently the most preferred in South Africa in particular and around the world in general". At the North-West University (NWU), underprepared students are supported by two academic literacy module offerings in their first year of study. During the first semester, basic academic literacy abilities are addressed in a scaffolded way in the module, Academic Literacy Development (ALDE111). Students are introduced to various strategies that address accessing, processing and producing information, respectively. This approach allows the student to focus on one ability at a time before being expected to integrate various abilities.

During the second semester, a more integrated academic writing process receives attention in a second support module (Academic Literacy Development [ALDE122]). In this more advanced module, students are expected to integrate abilities such as accessing information and referencing skills mastered during the first semester into the academic writing process. During the second semester, students get the opportunity to work through the writing process in a step-by-step manner. The different parts of this process that are focused on one-by-one are ultimately put together into a single, complete, formal written assignment.

Figure 1 below serves as a summary that illustrates how different components and abilities are approached in the two AL support modules (ALDE111 and ALDE122).

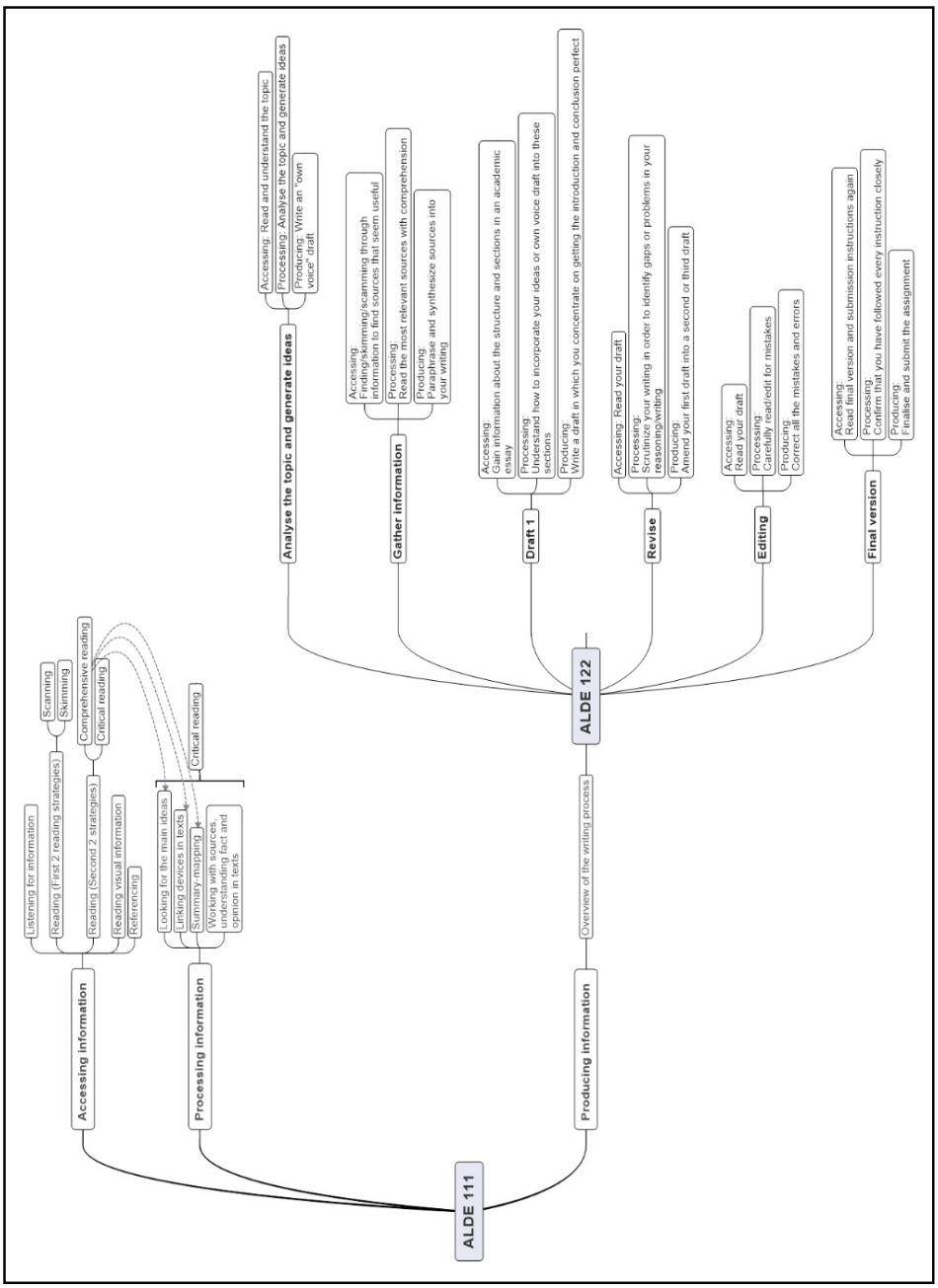

Figure 1: *ALDE111 and ALDE122*

Pre-Covid-19, the writing process was approached in a workshop model. Students would receive a discipline-specific topic in the first class and start with pre-writing activities, such as planning and completing a freewriting draft. Students were encouraged to bring their draft to class every week, and after a short discussion of the fundamental concepts of the next step in the writing process, they would be given time to work on their draft and implement whatever was discussed during the session. This happened while they had access to the lecturer and peers for support, motivation and guidance. During the semester, the lecturer would periodically assess sections of the draft (the introductory section, for example) and later other sections, always providing feedback on individual writing. Ultimately, the students had to submit a final draft after concluding their writing process. This final draft, in the form of a roughly 1 200-word academic essay, was then again assessed by the lecturer.

This approach ensured that students were less overwhelmed by the task at hand, and truly grasped that academic writing is a meticulous and progressive process. They received individual feedback and had the opportunity to incorporate feedback to improve their draft before the final submission. Unfortunately, this approach had to be changed radically due to the pandemic restrictions and the subsequent emergency teaching approach.

7. The emergency remote online teaching approach

Emergency remote online teaching (EROT) strategy implemented by the NWU forced the subject group to amend the approach in an extremely short amount of time. An asynchronous online approach was implemented where text-based content was placed online, and discussions of fundamental concepts were recorded and made available to students. Providing students with a generic topic proved to be less complex to administrate, and therefore the discipline-specific topics were eliminated. The workshop approach was not viable, but in order still to guide students in a step-by-step fashion, the module site on the learner management system was set up in such a way as to promote step-by-step completion of one task or 'writing process step' before the next could be attempted. Each lesson (or step in the writing process) was divided into three recurring sub-sections, covering fundamental concepts, practical application, and enrichment or mastering of the skill. After each sub-section, students needed to complete a small task to unlock the next sub-section of content. These tasks were linked to virtual badges that students could earn in a bid to raise motivation and engagement through a reward system.

The first sub-section (fundamental concepts) generally contained content that would have been discussed in the pre-Covid-19 contact sessions. The second sub-section (practical application) would provide examples and prompted students to apply the step in a writing task or practice the step in a scenario, depending on the complexity of the task. The final sub-section (enrichment or mastering) would either contain a more advanced application task or a task that expected of students to judge how well the step in the writing process was applied. This approach helped to guide the students in a step-by-step fashion, but assessment remained challenging, since the number of smaller tasks could easily lead to overassessment if a complete essay was still expected from students.

Students were therefore not expected to complete a full essay. Their writing ability was tested in a compartmentalised approach. Student received more, but shorter, less involved assessments. The heavier weighted assessments included writing an individual introduction and completing two guided writing assessments, which required of students to complete an

incomplete, pre-written essay. After each writing task, students received individual feedback for their efforts. With this approach, the subject group attempted to safeguard students against becoming overwhelmed and presented the information in a more digestible form, since they did not have immediate access to resources like lecturers and peers as in the workshop approach.

Figure 2 below illustrates how one section of the writing process (Introductions) was facilitated according to the two different approaches for easy comparison.

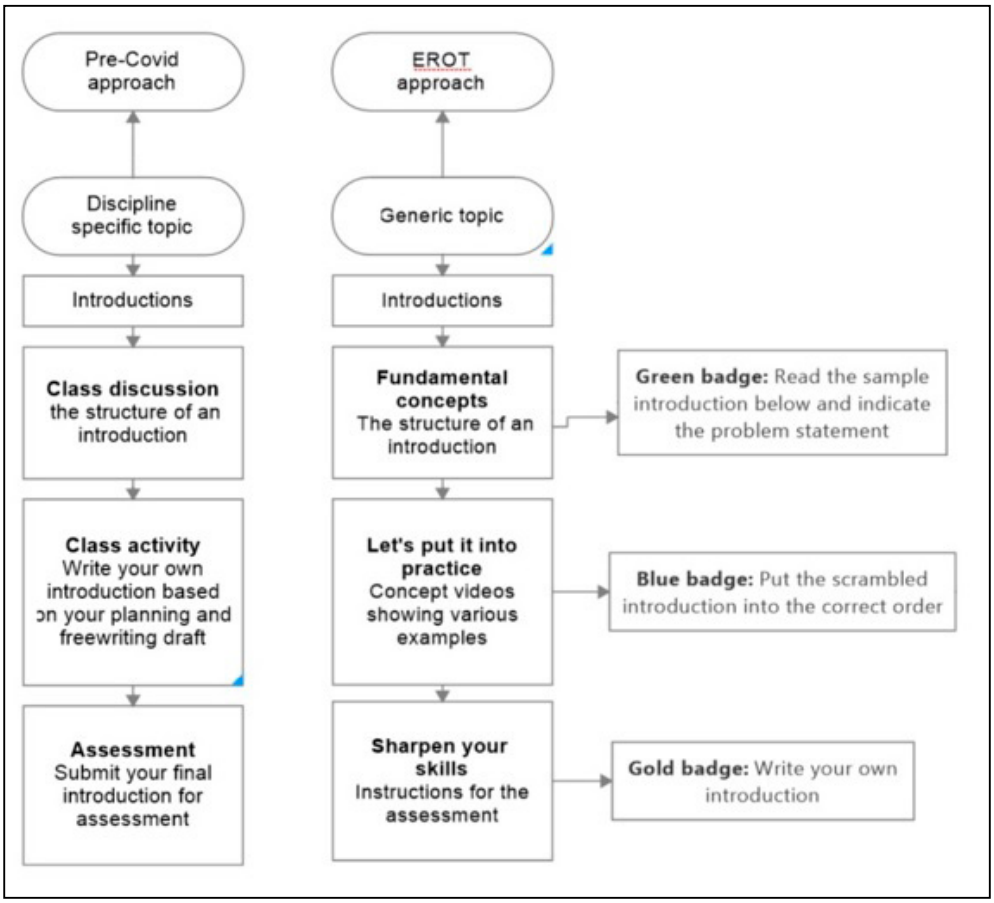

Figure 2: *Introduction comparison*

8. The post-Covid-19 hybrid approach

We now find ourselves in a post-Covid-19 situation where we no longer need to use the EROT approach, but the remnants of these emergency measures remain part of our teaching experience. Furthermore, the rapid development of language processing tools, driven by AI technology (like ChatGPT) that can generate original, natural-sounding text based on prompts, has necessitated the consideration of a sensible hybrid approach towards academic writing instruction. The new hybrid teaching model combines elements from both the traditional pre-Covid-19 workshop approach as well as the EROT approach.

The new teaching approach still makes use of the threefold weekly breakdown into sub-sections for which students can earn badges. The first sub-section (fundamental concepts) currently serves as a class preparation section that students are expected to complete before the weekly contact session. This is done to create conditions for intentional content preparation prompting, a way of guiding students through sections of fundamental theory or content before class. This will allow both students and lecturers to use the contact sessions optimally. The next sub-section (practical application) now forms the base for the practical application that they will do in class – similar to the workshop approach followed traditionally. The last sub-section (enrichment) assists students in ensuring that they truly master the practical skill practised and serves as enrichment that can be attempted after the contact session.

This teaching model seems to be working in terms of student engagement, but the assessment of writing itself remains problematic for many reasons. Firstly, the teaching approach does not eliminate the issue of plagiarism and the use of AI-generated writing. Secondly, even though the NWU currently follows a discipline-specific approach to academic literacy, it complicates the marking of an academic essay, since the lecturers of academic literacy are not experts in the respective fields of the students they teach. This makes it difficult to assess the content of an academic essay based on specific fields of study. What has furthermore proven to be problematic is the assumed frame of reference that lecturers expect students to have when choosing topics for academic literacy assessments. Sometimes, the seemingly interesting and easy topics chosen by lecturers are so far removed from the frame of reference of the students that they struggle to grasp the fundamental concepts and subsequently fail to form any sort of logical argument about the topic. Thirdly, the ever-increasing student numbers make it impossible to mark multiple drafts of the same essay throughout the semester in a reasonable amount of time that allows for individualised and meaningful feedback. One way of solving these issues is by adapting our expectations of what is important in assessing a writing course and including critical writing awareness and reflection as non-negotiable elements.

9. The reflect-rewrite approach

Critical reflection and, more specifically, reflective writing, is proposed as one alternative way of assessing the challenges experienced when it comes to assessing student writing. Thejll-Madsen (2018: 2) defines reflection as "the conscious examination of past experiences, thoughts and ways of doing things. Its goal is to surface learning about oneself and a situation, and to bring meaning to it in order to inform the present and the future …"

The value of reflection for teaching and learning is well documented (Maree & Van Rensburg, 2013; O'Farrell & Fitzmaurice, 2013; Mantzoukas, 2007; Ryan & Ryan, 2013). According to Lew and Schmidt (2011) and Wegner, Turcic and Hohner (2015), empirical evidence suggests that effective reflection can predict or contribute to academic performance. Reflective assessment as a tool to build critical thinking skills is "championed by a handful of individuals …; yet remains relatively underutilised as a tool for critical thinking skill building" (Woldt & Nenad, 2020: 784). This is confounding, as it has proven to be a truly useful tool, and in the context of South Africa, where students contend with a myriad of challenges centred around the inability to apply critical and original thinking, could be implemented to mitigate this. Allan and Driscoll (2014: 49), for example, state that "the seemingly simple act of reflection can become a transformative, powerful practice that produces at least three benefits: reinforcing and extending student learning, improving assessment to better understand our programs,

and facilitating faculty engagement in professional development". Furthermore, Ono and Ichii (2019: 247) confirm that "reflective writing enables students to make meaning of their learning and transfer it to the cultural context" of their course's practical application field. Finally, Kathpalia and Heah (2008: 300) go so far as saying that a "writing portfolio without reflection is merely a collection of written work which does not contribute to 'real' learning". In a context where 'real' learning and development are critical, it is vital to include inclusive practices, such as reflective writing, in our academic support modules.

Introducing reflection into a teaching approach will undoubtedly be beneficial to students, but reflection in itself will not solve the writing assessment dilemma. As ALDE122 is an academic writing module, students ultimately need to demonstrate that they can apply academic writing conventions to produce an academic text.

The reflect-rewrite-model suggested by the authors is based on a study conducted by Allan and Driscoll (2014). They present a model that includes reflective writing as a method to assess a general education first-year writing course in the USA. Not only do they demonstrate that reflective writing can be used successfully in conjunction with traditional essay or research paper writing to assess students, but they furthermore demonstrate that "reflective writing can encourage students to view learning as a process, develop students' metacognitive awareness and promote learning beyond first year writing courses" (Allan & Driscoll, 2014). These findings are aligned with what we aim to achieve with academic writing courses. Like the teaching approach followed at the NWU, students in the Allan and Driscoll (2014) study also submitted a formal written assignment (in this case a research paper) as part of their coursework. However, in their study, Allan and Driscoll (2014) requested lecturers to include a reflective assessment as part of the assessment plan, prompting students to write a 600 to 800-word reflective essay that answered five questions about their experiences in completing the research paper. These reflective essays were assessed using a rubric that rated the level of detail and depth of insight for each step in the research paper writing process.

The reflect-rewrite-model approach (Figure 3) proposed in the current paper suggests that a similar teaching approach be followed for ALDE122 at the NWU. Students should still use the post-Covid-19 hybrid workshop approach (as discussed in the previous section) to complete an academic essay. Lecturers will need to assess sections of this essay throughout the semester and give timely feedback as they have traditionally done, but will not assess the final draft of the academic essay like they did in the past. This should still be viable, since shorter sections are less time-consuming to mark. As a final assessment, students should be requested to reflect on their own final, completed academic essays and then be prompted to write a reflective essay based on their experience of completing the writing assignment. This is the writing piece that would then be assessed by the lecturers, using a specific marking rubric. Since students will be requested to complete a formal piece of writing, a section in the marking rubric can be attributed to assessment of formal writing conventions and structure, with the rest of the rubric being used to assess the level of insight and detail that they reached in terms of self-reflection.

This approach will mitigate several challenges currently experienced in the module offering. Firstly, because students will be writing from their individual experience, they may be less likely to plagiarise. The authors argue that this is because tailoring, for example, essay topics to individual student contexts, such as future career paths or fields of study, encourages students to think about the way the writing topic affects their own context, and therefore at least

slightly mitigates the likeliness of plagiarising content from existing generalised topics. While admirable strategies discussed earlier certainly would help in the combating of plagiarism, the authors argue that a different approach to the writing course and, more specifically, the assessment of writing, can help to deal with this challenge in a different way. Introducing reflection as a key part of the writing process addresses plagiarism much earlier and from a more personal angle. It creates the opportunity for self-awareness and self-adjustment instead of relying on a bottom-up approach. Thus, instead of relying on the monitoring of plagiarism *ex post facto*, where plagiarism is eliminated in a top-down fashion (monitor plagiarism and then adjust), reflection works in a bottom-up approach to eliminate the need for plagiarism from conception of the argument and before commencement of the actual writing project. Simply put, we have the opportunity to catch them before they copy and paste.

Students may feel less intimidated when writing a reflective essay, since their lived experience is typically a topic they know much about and should not be a potentially foreign topic. Academic literacy staff will not be expected to judge content or arguments about various topics they may not have expertise on, but will be able to judge the content of the reflection, as this will be based on the writing process. Lastly, lecturers will not be expected to mark multiple drafts of the same essay, but will assess a single assessment that will also provide insight into the process followed by the student without needing to compare drafts. Not only will a well-written reflection indicate what the student improved on and how; it will also indicate why they chose to do so.

While the authors strongly advocate this reconceptualised approach to the final written assessment, it would be dangerous to assume that students will be accustomed to reflecting, or that they will know what is expected of them in such a reflective task. The authors therefore suggest that reflection be introduced throughout the semester and incorporated into each step of the writing process in a more explicit way. The illustration below shows where in the *reflect-rewrite*-model reflective tasks can be introduced and also provide examples of such tasks. The examples were based on suggestions and illustrations provided by the *Reflectors Toolkit* of the University of Edinburgh (2023).

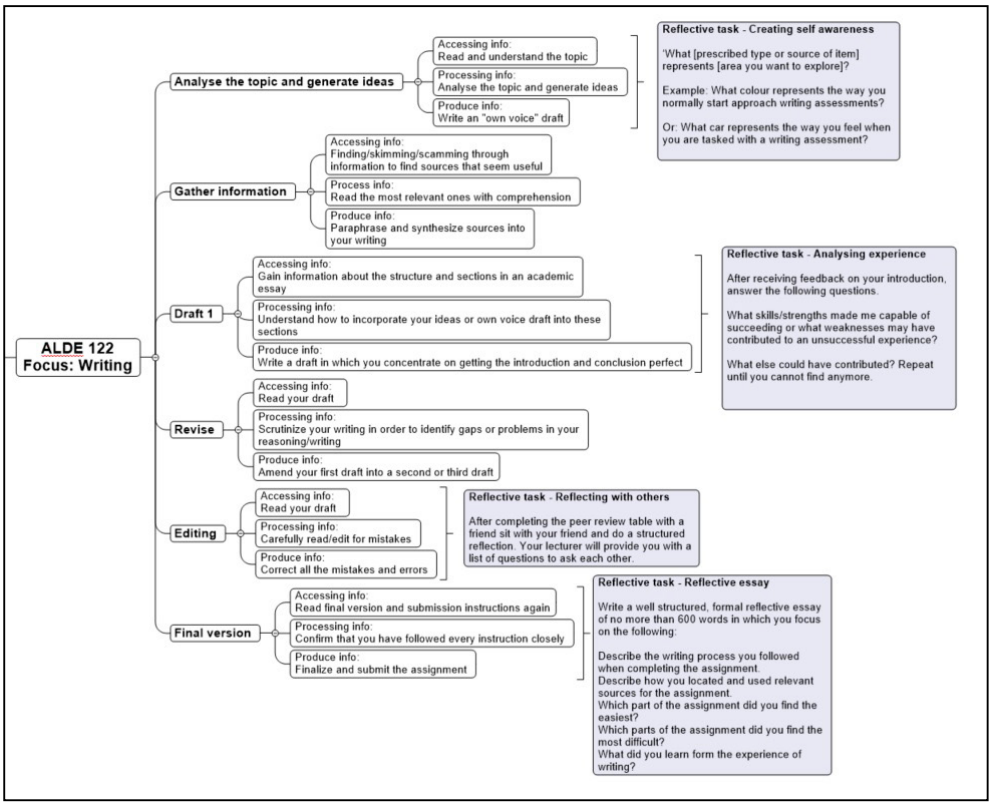

Figure 3: *Reflect-rewrite-model*

Thus, the reflect-rewrite-model not only cultivates critical writing awareness, but by shifting the focus away from a final be-all-end-all product, to a reflective, recursive process, we also hope to build student confidence in writing and so enhance student success.

10. Conclusion

When taking into consideration the multiple challenges faced by South African students and lecturers, along with the excessive anxiety caused by the Covid-19 teaching-learning context, and its pedagogical remnants which hamper students even more, we as lecturers need to find a way forward. By identifying the role of plagiarism, the lack of critical thinking and writing skills and the general underpreparedness of students, we should understand that with the current support we are able to provide, we cannot realistically address these issues with the same tools that we have used in the past. We can, however, try to course-correct and implement different approaches to writing assessment in order to mitigate the extent of said issues. The proposed model by no means belittles the importance of teaching and assessing a final academic writing product; it simply asks whether we should change our expectations if we assign the same values to end-product assessment in a changed context. It questions our expectations that students will not plagiarise or revert to AI-produced texts when faced with the intimidating task of first-year academic writing without an adapted, supportive and guided workshop-like teaching approach. It asks whether we

can place equivalent value on the outcome when the context has changed significantly. It asks whether we can assess the same things that we did in the past, while working from such a different context with such a different cohort of students. Finally, it asks what the true goal of AL intervention modules are, and whether we meet these if we do not care to venture onto the path of context-bound correction.

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