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Show me your true colours: Scaffolding formative academic literacy assessment through an online learning platform

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ABSTRACT

In higher education, formative academic literacy assessment tends to prioritise the product, i.e. a written text, rather than the writing processes, i.e. an active and focused reading which leads to the development of an evidence-based argument. This paper shifts the emphasis from the written product to the writing processes and investigates the effectiveness of formative academic literacy assessment in facilitating students' engagement with composing processes and in helping them develop evidence-based writing. The study was conducted on a presessional programme, involved 15 students and used an online learning platform to stimulate students' criticality, evidence their active reading, and compile their formative essay in incremental steps of note-taking, outlining and paragraphing. Collected data (outlines/essays with feedback, student-generated digital artefacts, and questionnaires/follow-up interviews) were analysed qualitatively, employing genre/inductive analysis for student writing, semiotic analysis for students' digital sites, and thematic analysis for questionnaires/interviews. The findings indicate that emphasising composing processes and utilising an online platform to scaffold formative academic literacy assessment boosts students' understanding of text composition and helps to uncover and overcome difficulties encountered by student-writers while learning to write. The discussion highlights the educational value of online learning platforms and the affordances of multimodal resources in creating innovative assessment practices.

1. Introduction

Assessment in higher education is predominantly conducted through evidence-based writing, and as such students' successful progression largely depends on being academically literate and demonstrating competence in compiling scholarly texts. However, research in academic literacy strongly indicates that responding to the demands of written assessment constitutes a major struggle for university students (Ivanič & Lea, 2006; Lawrence, 2003; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011). Key areas of difficulty include understanding the requirements of written assessment (Leung, 2008; Lillis, 2001), engaging with reading (Hardy & Clughen, 2012; Wingate, 2015) and following conventions of evidence-based academic prose (Ganobcsik-Williams, 2006; Scott, 2002; Wingate, 2012b). Therefore, in contemporary academia one of the main challenges is to provide literacy instruction that moves away from 'fixing' surface problems with students' texts (Lea & Street, 1998, p.159) to one that creates learning opportunities which make hidden features of academic conventions visible (Street, 2009) and which offer a transformative rather than remedial learning experience (Blythman & Orr, 2006; Lillis, Harrington, Lea, & Mitchell, 2016). While much of the research on academic literacy focuses on how to support students through traditional classroom instruction in understanding rhetorical and lexico-grammatical features of academic texts (Horne & Peake, 2011; Lillis, 2006), significantly less attention has been given to formative assessment and

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the affordances of online technologies in moving literacy support beyond the written product and in emphasising the processes involved in textual composition.

The study reported in this paper aims to advance the understanding of these issues by exploring the effectiveness of formative academic literacy assessment, as scaffolded through an online learning platform, in facilitating student engagement with composing processes and in helping students develop evidence-based writing.

The paper starts by reviewing literature relevant to formative assessment of academic literacy and to the use of online technology in literacy support. Then, the research methods are explained, followed by the presentation of findings and discussion. The paper closes with brief conclusions and implications for pedagogic practice.

2. Literature review

2.1. Supporting learning: formative assessment of academic literacy

Formative assessment is a complex and fuzzy concept (Yorke, 2003). It is best characterised as a type of assessment aimed at facilitating and promoting student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011). In contrast to summative assessment which is focused on achievement (Nation & Macalister, 2009) and seeks to establish whether students 'have reached a particular standard' (Fulcher, 2013, p.3), formative assessment can be conceptualised as learning-oriented (Carless, 2007) and is designed to support the learning process by guiding students towards the intended learning goal (Wiliam, 2011). As such, formative assessment creates an environment for sustained student engagement in a particular learning task (Earl, 2013; Lam, 2016), and it empowers students to develop an in-depth understanding of assessment requirements by opening a dialogic space (Lillis, 2006) in which students can collaborate with the tutor and with each other 'to produce a best performance' (Wood, 1987, p.242).

In the context of academic literacy, formative assessment tends to prioritise linguistic and textual features of written academic prose. This usually takes the shape of a tutor commenting on multiple drafts of students' assignments. Lillis (2006), for example, describes her dialogues with students aimed at 'making language visible' (p.32) and encouraging them to share their perspectives on textual development and writing conventions. Wingate (2012a) presents her initiative of supporting student literacy development through formative feedback on students' exploratory essays. The feedback was given in one-to-one meetings and focused on the text-related issues of students' submissions. Another example of the centrality of text in formative assessment relates to helping students understand grading criteria. Horne and Peake (2011) offer an account of developing specific marking criteria for a geography course and operationalising them with 'discrete elements of writing in the target genre' (p.110). They then used the operationalised examples in teaching and later distributed them to students in a booklet.

This prominence of the written text in formative assessment results from various theoretical approaches which, with admittedly varied degrees of emphasis, characterise academic literacy in terms of text structure and language features (as in English for Academic Purposes, e.g.: Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Hyland, 2006), situatedness of disciplinary genres (as in Genre Studies, e.g.: Rose & Martin, 2012; Swales, 1990) or with regard to wider issues impacting textual conventions (as in Academic Literacies Approach and Critical English for Academic Purposes, e.g: Benesch, 2001; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007). Such conceptualisations of academic literacy prioritise the product, i.e. a written text, without giving explicit and significant considerations to the reading and writing processes that are crucial to textual composition and that precede the textual development (Chan, Inoue, & Taylor, 2015; Plakans & Gebril, 2012).

While emphasising the text and supporting student learning by helping them to understand textual conventions is undoubtedly useful and needed, recent research on academic literacy indicates that students' problems with writing start prior to developing texts and begin with reading (Cumming, Lai, & Cho, 2016; Deane & O'Neill, 2011) and superficial understanding of evidence-based argumentation (Andrews & Mitchell, 2000; Wingate, 2012b). For example, Hardy and Clughen (2012) report that while academic lecturers take for granted students' engagement with reading, students often find academic texts difficult to penetrate due 'to their lack of previous knowledge of these text genres and their lack of familiarity with content' (p.28). A similar perspective is offered by McCulloch (2013) who in her exploration of reading-to-writing processes challenges the view that the use of sources in writing constitutes 'the writing end of the reading-to-write continuum' (p.136) and offers data suggesting that students' problems with using sources begins in the pre-writing stages. McCulloch contends that 'a greater focus on critical reading in [writing] courses may help [student] writers to avoid some of the common pitfalls of source use in academic writing, such as lack of evaluation or failure to take an authoritative stance' (p.146). The use of sources in the development of argument is also discussed by Wingate (2012b) whose findings show that 'selecting relevant information from the literature is clearly a concern to students' (p.150). Wingate puts forward an essay writing framework in which she lists 'selecting and using relevant information from sources' (Wingate, 2012b, p.153) as an integral component of developing an academic argument.

Drawing on the perspectives and findings discussed above, the study presented in this paper aims to shift the focus of formative academic literacy assessment from the written products to the composing processes. Specifically, formative academic literacy assessment is defined here as a type of assessment which supports students' engagement with composing processes and leads them from initial engagement with a given topic, through active and focused reading to incorporating evidence into a developing text and compiling the final finished draft. The support offered relies on breaking down writing processes into specific tasks and encouraging dialogue amongst student-writers and between an individual student and a tutor. Such conceptualisation of formative academic literacy assessment opens a wider educational space and, without diminishing the importance of the textual focus, allows for such elements of literacy processes as reading or developing an evidence-based argument to be explicitly brought into writing instruction. As successful textual development depends on composing processes, it is vital to create such inclusive opportunities for learning and

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