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How can first-year assessment contribute to the continuing development of students' academic writing skills?

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ABSTRACT

There is an ongoing debate that first-year assessment does not prepare students to deal successfully with future writing tasks. This paper suggests that one of the reasons might be a narrow focus on assessment strategies and interventions that meet immediate learning goals to help reduce assessment shock. It is suggested that designing scaffolded pedagogical activities that prioritise development of students' evaluative judgement might enable first-year assessment to achieve two ends: alleviating assessment shock and preparing students to more effectively traverse future writing tasks. The concept of evaluative judgement and embedded features of activities with the potential to develop this capability are elaborated. These, along with first-year students' writing challenges, are considered as a basis for some practice design considerations suggested to establish a more effective learning environment that helps first-year assessment achieve its dual purposes.

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Introduction

It has been an ongoing argument for some time now that many first-year students, irrespective of background or origin, struggle with the transition from a largely generic approach to writing at high school to the disciplinary-oriented writing approach expected at university (Barnett, 2009; Elliott et al., 2019). As Hyland (2013) states, rather than merely focusing on the generic or lower-order writing skills such as paragraphing, structuring and referencing, academic writing in higher education is embedded in the epistemological beliefs and practices of individual disciplines. These beliefs and practices often force students into a new style and ways of writing which run counter to their prior experiences in high school. When entering the university, therefore, students realise that in order to successfully meet the demands of writing tasks, they need to not only draw upon their previous learning experiences of generic skills but also come to terms with the knowledge, content, thinking and argumentation of their particular discipline.

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Understanding these disciplinary conventions and standards to effectively respond to the requirements of writing tasks poses a number of challenges to the first-year students, of which assessment shock has been reported consistently (Elliott et al., 2019; Itua et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2019).

To alleviate assessment shock, a number of strategies have been introduced in the first-year curriculum. Provision of rubrics and exemplars (Bell et al., 2013; G. D. Hendry et al., 2016; Jonsson & Panadero, 2017) and quality feedback on student response (Blair, 2017) are among the well-established strategies suggested by earlier studies. In some cases, the effectiveness of these strategies in improving the transparency of disciplinary standards and criteria of writing tasks and, as a result, alleviating assessment shock has been reported. The use of rubrics in conjunction with exemplars, for example, has yielded some evidence of improvements in students' understanding of the expected standards of specific genres such as essays (G. Hendry & Anderson, 2013), critical reviews (G. D. Hendry et al., 2016) and case studies (Wimshurst & Manning, 2013). The findings of these studies, along with the broader literature on the first-year assessment, imply that there are some pedagogical strategies that, if implemented properly, would improve transparency of discipline-specific writing expectations. This might meet, to some extent, the purpose of first-year assessment practices in terms of alleviating assessment shock.

A neglected area, however, is that existing assessment strategies have been less than successful in building a foundation for developing and sustaining students' knowledge and skills that contribute to their future writing achievements. Empirical evidence shows that many undergraduate students have not reached their potential in managing and regulating effective resources such as peer learning, online learning and help-seeking to successfully plan, monitor and evaluate the writing process (Knoch et al., 2014). Attention has also focused on students' lack of well-developed ability to employ various strategies to analyse the structural and rhetorical requirements of a particular assignment genre and produce a response that is congruent with the specifications stipulated in the task (Itua et al., 2014; Karlen & Compagnoni, 2017; Morton et al., 2015). This is despite the fact that many of these students have been successful in receiving a pass mark on their writing assignments in first-year units and have progressed to the next level of studies.

Taking on this challenge, the notion of evaluative judgement is used in this paper to discuss how framing written assessment practices in the first-year curriculum from the perspective of evaluative judgement might have potential to both address assessment shock and prepare students to deal with future writing tasks successfully. Four significant features of the pedagogical activities with the potential to develop students' evaluative judgement are discussed. Drawing on an empirical analysis of these features in first-year students' writing challenges, and published research on assessment design, the paper concludes by proposing ways of designing assessment activities that can contribute more effectively to the development of students' evaluative judgement.

Assessment of academic writing: the gap in the existing practices

Why do existing practices in written assessment not contribute as much as they should to better prepare students for their future writing tasks?

To foreground an understanding of the main reason behind this predicament, the paper starts with a discussion of recent conceptualisations of what the act of academic

writing involves. As Hyland (2013) argues, academic writing is a complex activity, which requires students to possess a number of skills, besides having knowledge of standards, to be able to produce texts of high quality. This includes an appreciation of how to perform a writing task. Hyland further argues that knowing how to perform the task involves an awareness of how to analyse the task, how to elicit information about quality features of the task from various resources, and how to use that information to monitor and regulate the writing process. Taking this perspective, Knoch et al. (2014) argue that, in addition to mastery of these skills, students also need to develop an awareness of how and when to apply an appropriate strategy in a particular context of writing to overcome challenges. As they state, students might face a number of challenges while completing their assignments. From the perspective of linguistic and literacy skills of students, the most common challenges can be identifying relevant materials, avoiding plagiarism and meeting word limits. To write successfully, therefore, students need to understand the characteristics of the challenge and make decisions on the most effective strategies and techniques they can apply to overcome the challenge.

The conceptualisation of academic writing described above suggests that learning to write academically is not a matter of merely receiving information about the quality standards of a given task through interventions such as teacher feedback, rubrics and exemplars. It also involves an understanding of essential skills in planning, monitoring and evaluating their writing performance and overcoming challenges. Development of such higher order writing skills, as suggested by scholars (Hayes et al., 2017; Hodges, 2017), is experiential and difficult to impart to students through mere exposure to and observation of the information and facts about how to write successfully. It needs an active engagement of students with the learning tasks with a view of applying the learned facts and information to real writing contexts (Hayes et al., 2017). This view of learning to write academically means that students need to take personal responsibility for examining their own writing performance by observing and reflecting on quality information, exchanging ideas with others and taking appropriate actions in the form of evaluation and revision.

It follows from this gap in earlier interventions that a more comprehensive and holistic writing assessment approach is needed to not only orientate students towards the disciplinary nature of writing standards but support them in improving their higher order writing skills. To this end, designing assessment activities through the lens of evaluative judgement has been offered as a potential pathway.

Evaluative judgement: definition and theoretical discussions

The origin of the term evaluative judgement can be traced back to the work of Sadler (1989), who discussed how formative assessment can be designed to build students' 'evaluative knowledge' (p. 135). This was posited as an embodied knowledge that students must possess to effectively demystify the standards of an assessment genre and judge the appropriateness of their responses to the task.

In parallel with the introduction of Sadler's notion of evaluative knowledge, the notion of student-centeredness also attracted interest in the discourses of higher education assessment research and practice. As a consequence, attention focused on the role of learners in the learning process as active agents who can develop their

understandings and skills to be both producers and assessors of knowledge. This involves the activity and initiative of the learner in a learning environment to not only elicit and generate knowledge with the help of others but also develop an awareness of what that knowledge is and how it can be applied to significant problems. Taking this fundamental idea in education into consideration, Tai et al. (2018) introduced the concept of 'evaluative judgement' to shift the focus of assessment and feedback towards creating a learning environment that contributes to the capability of learners to do this. The authors defined evaluative judgement as 'the capability to make decisions about the quality of the work of self and others' (p. 5).

Boud et al. (2018) then attempted to demystify the knowledge and skills underpinning the evaluative judgement capability and how they can be developed. The discussions of various authors in this book suggest that in order to make appropriate judgements, students need to have an appreciation of what constitutes quality in the kind of work they aim to produce. They need to be able to discern if their work meets the relevant standards and criteria attributed to quality. In the context of academic writing, this includes students' discernment of generic standards of quality writing in higher education as well as genre-specific standards that represent quality of their particular assignment. In addition, as Chen et al. (2022) suggest, students' learning of skills such as seeking assistance from others is also critical in the process of quality discernment.

To reach their potential in making evaluative judgements in relation to an assessment task, students also need to have practical experience of performing self-evaluation or evaluation of others' performance. The concept of practical experience here concerns actions and practices in the process of learning to evaluate a piece of work. Ryle (1949) used the term 'practical experience' to refer to knowing how to perform a task or action. Ryle further argues that knowing how to accomplish a task is not only a matter of knowing the right information and facts about how to do it. It is an ability that is developed through extended experience of applying the learned conceptual facts and information to the real context. In the context of assessment, Sadler's (1989) work on formative assessment implicitly points to this issue. He claims that a learner must satisfy the following conditions for improvement: possess a concept of the standard being aimed for, and engage in the appropriate evaluative actions. Developing practical experience of evaluation, therefore, requires active engagement of students with learning tasks with a view of applying the standards in different judgement-making situations. The basic logic behind this view is that mere exposure to the standards of quality does not enable students to apply them (Mehrabi Boshrabadi & Hosseini, 2021).

Appropriate feedback is also important in the context of evaluative judgement. Students need feedback on the quality of their judgements of a piece of work (Boud et al., 2015), whether it is their own or others' work. The aim of such feedback is to help students calibrate the judgements they make of a piece of work through, for example, asking them to justify the judgements. Such feedback can be provided by both teachers and peers following a student's initial judgement of a piece of work.

The link between evaluative judgement and first-year students' writing challenges

How can framing academic writing assessment from the evaluative judgement perspective address first-year students' challenges in academic writing?

The conceptualisation of evaluative judgement discussed above shows two features of the evaluative judgement capability. Firstly, to make decisions about the quality of any work, the learner must have an appreciation of what constitutes quality. Indeed, how can students produce or evaluate quality work if they do not know what quality work looks like? There is a range of standards featuring quality work. Standards can be explicit and provided to students in many courses. They may be predetermined and codified in formal documents such as rubrics or guidelines of the specific course. Often, however, standards of quality work are implicit and embedded in the course materials, texts, and examples of work, as well as in the practices of academics working within a disciplinary community (Ajjawi et al., 2019). To reach their potential in discerning quality standards, students thus need to be engaged in a range of interpersonal interactions and textual reflections within the discipline. Examples of such interactions and reflections include approaching human resources (teacher, peers, family member, friends) to have discussions about the demands of a particular task and analysing exemplars or relevant academic texts. The aim is for students to negotiate and clarify the meaning of existing concepts and criteria, and/or to gain new information about the standards representing a quality work. This can be considered as a useful approach in meeting one of the main purposes of first-year assessment; i.e. improving students' understanding of the discipline-specific writing standards and alleviating assessment shock.

Setting up situations in which students can make judgements of the work of self and others is another integral part of evaluative judgement (Boud et al., 2018; Johnson & Molloy, 2018). This is needed for both improving students' understanding of the standards of quality work and developing their practical experiences of how to evaluate a piece of work or performance. Regarding the former, it is arguable that students' engagement in evaluative processes can refine their existing knowledge of quality standards or help them gain new information about what the elements of good work are. Through analysing others' texts, for example, a student might note some elements representing quality in the text that are missing in their own work. Engagement in activities that support an authentic experience for learners to make and justify their judgements of others' work, receive feedback on their judgements and provide feedback on others' judgement can have another learning benefit, that is, improving students' higher order writing skills. As Boud et al. (2018) argue, such practices have the potential to, over time, develop students' awareness of how to critically analyse the work of other authors in their subject area, to collect and organise ideas from a variety of sources or to evaluate the appropriateness of their response to the task without overreliance on the teacher.

Taking this perspective, we suggest that the capability to make evaluative judgements should be one of the main outcomes to be developed in all academic writing activities if first-year assessment aims to both reduce assessment shock and help students with

learning higher order writing skills that they can continue to develop. But how can educators design and implement pedagogical activities that help first-year assessment achieve its dual purpose? To answer this question, an understanding of the embedded features of pedagogical activities with the potential to develop evaluative judgement capability is essential.

Features of the activities with the potential to develop evaluative judgement of academic writing

As an emerging concept in education research, evaluative judgement has not been extensively investigated through empirical inquiries. The paper, therefore, draws on recent theoretical discussions on the pedagogical activities with the potential to support the development of evaluative judgement to portray the main features underlying them. As the focus of this paper is on evaluative judgement in the context of academic writing, this exploration is also based on recent conceptual and empirical works on the pedagogical practices of academic writing in higher education. Four interrelated features of the activities with the potential to support the development of evaluative judgement of academic writing were identified: authenticity, reflective thinking, social-interactive scaffolding and dialogue.

Authenticity

A key feature of the activities with potential to develop students' evaluative judgement is authenticity (Boud et al., 2018). Authenticity here refers to the design of disciplinary activities to provide students with realistic evaluative experiences so they can apply the acquired knowledge and skills to subsequent writing tasks. Students need to be exposed to a variety of authentic activities that are replicas or analogies of what they are required to perform in any writing context within the specific discipline. To deal successfully with the demands of writing tasks in an engineering context, for example, students need to be able to, among others, collect and organise information through their analytical skills, and to negotiate with others, exchange ideas and provide feedback (Mehrabi Boshrabadi & Hosseini, 2021).

Studies show that authentic activities that replicate performance standards typically found in similar writing contexts influence the quality and depth of students' evaluative skills (Carless & Chan, 2017; Ludemann & McMakin, 2014; Verhavert et al., 2019). First-year students in Ludemann and McMakin's (2014) study, for example, reported that they were able to apply their knowledge of the criteria and reviewing experience gained through purposeful analysis of others' texts to both evaluate the quality of the final draft of their own assignment and to reflect on the similar subsequent assignments and evaluate their progress.

Reflective thinking

Another core element underpinning assessment activities that promote evaluative judgement is that they encourage students' reflective thinking while engaged in the writing process. The aim of this type of assessment is to promote a learning environment in

which students are required to manage their reflective thinking skills and use other material resources (e.g. textual materials) to make sense of the disciplinary standards and direct the evaluation and monitoring of their own writing process. We can imagine the operation of reflective thinking skills in developing evaluative judgement through Hacker's (2018) definition of academic writing as 'the creation of meaning and the expression of understanding involving reading and thinking within an academic discipline'. Underpinning this definition is the fact that learning academic writing should be viewed as a way of learning from the standards that students gain through their reading and evaluating the texts written in the discipline. They need to reflect on and critically analyse, for example, how an argument has been developed and what rhetorical strategies have been used within the similar text based on the discourse style and the language of their specific discipline (Hammer & Green, 2011). Such reflection on the texts in the same domain can help students gain new information about standards of writing. This interpretation is consistent with the empirical works of other scholars (Nicol et al., 2014) where they report that students' reflection on and analysis of the others' texts stimulated them to actively interpret the criteria relevant to a particular writing assignment, figure out problems in their own work and make any required modifications.

In addition, by making comparisons between the texts and the writing they produce, students would be able to identify missing elements of their writing and improve it. Students' comparison of their work with different sources of information including other similar texts has been discussed in the recent work of Nicol (2021) on internal or inner feedback. As Nicol claims, students inherently tend to compare their own work and how they think about it with some reference information that is similar to their own work. Through reflection on and evaluation of the quality of another work, individuals can establish an abstract schema for quality involving the elements that discriminate good work from poor, which they might employ as a yardstick for evaluating and improving their own work.

Social-interactive scaffolding

Social-interactive scaffolding is a term that draws heavily on the work of the Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky asserted that individuals' cognitive development is achieved initially through their functions at the social or inter-psychological level (i.e. a dynamic interaction between individual and society) where learners interact with others in a social setting. Once they have undertaken and experienced their social learnings, learners will practice those mental functions in individual or intra-psychological level (i.e. internal processes such as self-reflection and critical thinking), which leads to cognitive development. Learning on the inter-psychological level is mediated through explicit means (e.g. artefacts, and the presence of others). It means that learning occurs when learners interact with other people and artefacts in a social setting, rather than merely relying on their own intellectual abilities.

Within the context of evaluative judgement of academic writing, social-interactive scaffolding means that understanding standards of writing tasks and making judgements cannot be seen solely as individual reflection on and interpretation of textual materials. Rather, learners' interactions with other human resources, including peers and teachers, is also essential. It is widely recognised that the complexity of most writing tasks

specifications might exceed the individual intellectual and cognitive capacity, hence they might need multiple and diverse sets of knowledge from different individuals to be interpreted (Ansley, 2020; Wingate, 2012). Negotiation with others, peers and teacher in particular and their complementary ideas can help students with successfully addressing the cognitive-demanding act of criteria interpretation. Prior research has evidenced these others provide students with many options and viewpoints on which they can reflect during the acts of interpretation and evaluation (Ansley, 2020; Morton et al., 2015). This means that an assessment design with the focus on developing evaluative judgement proposes a collaborative learning environment in which students can build upon each other's knowledge and experiences, ask and answer questions and challenge and critique each other on various points.

Dialogue

Dialogue with other members of the disciplinary community while engaged in the collaborative activities forms a critical part of the concept of evaluative judgement of academic writing. The use of a dialogic approach focuses on the negotiation of meaning and exchange of ideas in collaborative activities. In a case study with undergraduate students, Yu (2021), for example, analysed how classroom dialogue was carried out around peer review activities and found that dialogue encouraged students to provide the reason for the feedback produced and articulate the judgements made on peers' work. Such practices seemed to help students develop their abilities of self-questioning and justifying judgements made on a piece of work, two critical abilities that are integral to making evaluative judgements.

Attention has also focused on the critical role of dialogue in the feedback process, which has been a consequence of the recent call for more students' engagement with feedback (Malecka & Boud, 2021; Winstone et al., 2021). It is suggested that interactions students have in feedback dialogue with teacher and peers would enable them to explore, clarify and internalise expected criteria and standards of the assessment tasks more effectively (Esterhazy & Damşa, 2019).

Turning features into design

By exploring the features of written assessment activities that support development of evaluative judgement, we can begin to explore the shape of an assessment approach that not only certifies the transparency of discipline-specific standards of academic writing but also focuses on learning higher order writing skills required of students to take necessary actions in the form of evaluation and revision of a piece of work without being overdependent on teachers. Such an approach needs to provide authentic opportunities for students' reflection on material resources, interaction with human resources and dialogue in collaborative activities. Prior work has introduced a range of assessment activities that embrace these features to influence the development of evaluative judgement (Boud et al., 2018; Tai et al., 2018). Co-creation of rubrics, dialogic approach to exemplar analysis, peer review and self-assessment are some useful activities suggested. The focus of these studies has mainly been on the learners and their experiences of assessment.

Table 1. First-year assessment design decisions.

Type of decision	Aim	Action
Integrating activities with learner outcomes	To develop a capability development framework that portrays what writing knowledge and skills, and how, should be addressed	(1) Reflection on the discipline-specific writing knowledge and skills required of the graduates in the workplace. (2) Reflection on the type of assessment that can foster such knowledge and skills.
Selection and location of appropriate activities	To develop a structured learning environment that engage first-year students more actively in the evaluative judgement practices.	(1) Orientation of students towards a basic understanding of the disciplinary writing standards through: Engaging students in the discussion-based activities that require them to analyse and interpret standards of the previous assignments that are of high, or poor, quality. Engaging students in the negotiation of meaning and description of each criterion during the process of developing rubrics. (2) Development of students' practical experience of judgement-making through: Engaging students in various versions of peer review activities before assigning them self-evaluation activities
Feedback process	To ensure provision of meaningful feedback information and maximise the impact of teacher feedback on the development of evaluative judgement	(1) confirming or challenging students' judgements made on a piece of work. (2) asking students to provide reasons for the judgements they have made. (3) providing students with suggestions on how to improve their judgement-making skills.

What needs further exploration, however, is the role of educators and how they can systematically design and implement such activities in the first-year curriculum to encourage students' active participation in the evaluative judgement process. This is complicated given the reported evidence of the first-year students' lack of well-developed self-reflective skills in identifying standards and criteria of writing tasks (Nulty, 2011), and their lack of requisite skills for peer review and self-assessment (Bird & Yucel, 2015; Shalem et al., 2013; Walker & Hobson, 2014). Drawing on the theoretical discussions of the evaluative judgement, published research on assessment design and empirical studies on the first-year students' challenges, we conclude by discussing three overarching themes in the design of activities: integrating assessment activities with learner outcomes, selection and location of appropriate activities, and feedback processes. A summary of the 'what' and 'why' of assessment design decisions, along with actions to be undertaken by educators, is depicted in Table 1. The aim is to maximise the potential of current activities to develop first-year students' evaluative judgement of academic writing. It should be noted that the term 'educator' here refers to the university teachers who are responsible for making assessment decisions at the level of design, rather than senior staff who make decisions at the policy level.

Integrating assessment activities with learner outcomes

Fostering graduate attributes and the skills students expected to have and demonstrate beyond the point of graduation has been identified as the main goal of higher education. Current workplaces require graduates who have achieved specific learning outcomes, including critical thinking, communication, problem solving and collaboration. As a consequence, university educators have been pressed to design learning and assessment tasks that facilitate students' mastery of the expected programme-level learning outcomes. When it comes to making a decision on designing or improving an assessment activity, therefore, the first consideration is to reflect on how assessment aligns with, and promotes, desired learner outcomes.

To consider the alignment between the assessment activities and what students are required to know, understand and do in their profession on the completion of a given course, educators' reflection on the following question might be helpful: *what kinds of knowledge and skills do students need to learn to improve their future professional performance?* Within the context of academic writing, there can be a range of evaluative judgement knowledge and skills that is expected of graduates to demonstrate in any workplace. These include an awareness of how to:

- effectively demystify the disciplinary standards of writing tasks
- analyse and understand the structural and rhetorical requirements of a particular task,
- manage various human and material resources to judge the appropriateness of their response to the task and make improvements,
- engage in feedback conversations to share ideas and/or clarify misunderstandings in relation to the specifications of discipline-specific writing tasks including introducing the problem, establishing a gap, framing the argument and positioning their voice within the argument,

Reflecting on the workplace knowledge and skills required of graduates would help educators recognise the 'what' of the learner outcomes. However, to ensure that assessment effectively fosters the development of learner outcomes, the 'how' of learner outcomes should also be addressed. The focus here is on how these skills would be developed through assessment practices. This requires educators to make decisions on the type of assessment (i.e. summative or formative) that has the potential to capture the intended learner outcomes more effectively. To facilitate scaffolding and long-term learning effects, designing formative activities has been suggested by assessment scholars (e.g. Boud, 2022; Carless, 2015; Sadler, 1989). As Boud (2022) argues, for formative assessment to contribute to the scaffolding of evaluative judgement, the design features of the assessment activities, and feedback, should create opportunities for students to actively engage in seeking, discussing and using evidence.

The following example, from Carless and Chan (2017), is presented to portray how a formative design might have the potential to scaffold students' evaluative judgement skills. This was a formative activity implemented in a specific unit of a Bachelor of Primary Education course. The aim was to engage students in classroom activities and discussion groups so that students could critique and discuss

various criteria represented in the exemplars, assemble common elements underlying them and evaluate the quality of their own assignment (in this case, an expository essay) against those criteria. To this end, first the rationale for exemplar discussion was explained by the teacher and the expected criteria of the current writing task discussed in the assignment preparation phase. Modelling an exemplar, a class discussion was then facilitated in which students appraised the exemplars in groups, exchanged their views on the quality elements of the exemplars, and justified their views. Group discussions were then followed during the writing phase where students needed to negotiate and prepare a list of the more complex elements of quality underlying exemplars, such as rhetorical moves. At the final stage, students used the assembled criteria as a yardstick to compare the quality of their own work with that of their peers.

The aforementioned activity could provide students with an opportunity to explore, both socially and cognitively, the standards of the specific genre while negotiating ideas and eliciting information held by their peers and teacher. This would be a useful strategy for equipping students with the ability to use available resources such as peers and textual materials to understand the demands of the task. In addition, making comparisons between their own and others' work was a judgement-making action that students engaged with to detect discrepancies between what they were preparing and what they had read. Repeated exposure to such practices would, over time, position students to take a more active role of assessing their own learning with less dependency on others (Boud, 2022; Nicol, 2021).

Selection and location of appropriate activities

As discussed earlier, various formative pedagogical activities with the potential to develop evaluative judgement have been proposed in earlier studies. What remains unresolved, however, is which activity, when it should be deployed, and how it should be implemented. We suggest that a structured learning environment within the first-year academic writing assessment is required to ensure students' active engagement in the evaluative judgement process. Such a structured learning environment could be established if the following two criteria, among others, are met: 1) designing an induction phase in which students are orientated towards a basic understanding of discipline-specific writing standards prior to their engagement in any type of judgement-making activity, and 2) setting the scene for developing students' practical experience of judgement-making through first engaging them in peer review prior to self-evaluation. This section draws on the literature on first-year students' academic writing challenges to reason why establishing such a structured learning environment is needed.

Induction phase

In general, the broader theme of the literature on written assessment and feedback in the first-year context is concerned with the following key question: how to orientate students towards an understanding of the writing standards which align with teaching and assessment demands of the discipline? As discussed earlier, this is challenging due to students' prior experiences of a largely generic approach to writing in high school and the epistemological beliefs they bring with them into higher education. Scholars in the field

of academic writing argue that for successful transition to writing in higher education, students need to gain an in-depth understanding of how to negotiate epistemologies, forms of argumentation and text types within the discipline they are studying (Hyland, 2013; Wingate, 2012). In addition, the literature on evaluative judgement suggests that possessing a basic knowledge of the quality features of the particular assignment genre in which students are involved is necessary for them to engage in the act of evaluation (Boud et al., 2018). This implies the need for an induction phase to shift students' focus away from high school writing style to an understanding of the discipline-specific writing standards in higher education.

The use of rubrics and exemplars have been reported as two common strategies that can be employed to unpack the notion of disciplinary standards (Carless & Chan, 2017; Carless et al., 2018; Jonsson & Panadero, 2017). However, we should keep in mind that these tools would facilitate the scaffolding process of clarifying standards when employed as part of an overall assessment strategy which is nested in a dialogic approach involving student-peers and student-teacher discussions. This is because students' sense-making of the standards is a dynamic process in which meaning is constructed through their interactions with others including peers and teachers (Ajjawi & Bearman, 2018; Carless et al., 2018). The ways educators can encourage dialogue around exemplars, and their benefits, have been extensively reported elsewhere (Carless & Chan, 2017; Carless et al., 2018; G. D. Hendry et al., 2016). In terms of a dialogic approach towards rubrics, a promising way suggested by prior research is engaging students in collaboration with their teachers to co-construct assessment rubrics not only in the preparation phase but during the formative stages of an assessment activity (Ghaffar et al., 2020; Kilgour et al., 2020). The process of co-construction of rubrics with students allows for negotiation of, and sharing knowledge about, both standards and assessment methods in relation to a particular assessment genre (Kilgour et al., 2020). For example, the teacher might introduce a high-quality exemplar for each group of students and ask them to identify the features that they think make the work good. This could be followed by group discussions between students and teacher to develop a list of criteria. Each group can then share their criteria and, as a class, collectively determine which criteria are most important and can be generally agreed upon by everyone. The teacher can then involve students in the process of criteria descriptor by assigning each group to work on specific criteria. A discussion of various other ways to co-create rubrics with students and practical challenges of implementing these strategies in real-world settings has been presented in the work of other scholars (e.g. Ghaffar et al., 2020; Kilgour et al., 2020).

Assigning peer review activities prior to self-evaluation activities

Following the initial induction phase, students need to be provided with opportunities to put their basic knowledge of the standards into practice and exercise judgement-making activities. Setting up such situations is essential for both equipping students with how-to-assess skills and improving their understanding of the standards. Peer review and self-evaluation have been regarded as two effective pedagogical tools that have the potential to develop students' practical experience of judgement-making (Ajjawi & Bearman, 2018; Tai et al., 2018). However, to be more effective in terms of engaging first-year students in the evaluative judgement process, we suggest that peer review activities should precede self-evaluation activities.

There is a significant body of empirical research indicating that first-year students are not equipped with well-developed metacognition to enable them to reflect on the appropriateness of their own work, rapidly synthesise and use assessment information and make accurate self-evaluations (e.g. Bird & Yucel, 2015; Yucel et al., 2014). To support students' reflective and self-evaluation skills, peer learning has been suggested as an effective strategy (Nicol et al., 2014; To & Panadero, 2019). Regular peer review practices, participation in the discussion of comments and explanation of reasoning for the comments provided have been reported to help students reflect on their mastery of knowledge and strategy use, a process that deepens metacognitive reflection (Reinholz, 2016; To & Panadero, 2019). In addition, students' exposure to multiple perspectives in the peer review process with more depth and breadth of assessment information helps them recognise the gaps in their logic and clarify misunderstandings (Donia et al., 2018). Taken together, these elements are likely to help students derive reflective insights for monitoring and evaluating their own work at later stages.

In general, the application of the knowledge of standards to make judgements on peers' work has the potential to develop students' reflective skills and self-awareness of how to monitor the progress of a writing task, and how to evaluate the appropriateness of their own response to the task. This can set the ground for engagement of students in self-evaluation practices more effectively.

Feedback process

A key consideration in the assessment design, including the effects of assessment on developing students' evaluative judgement skills, is feedback. Two categories of feedback can be considered. The first is internal feedback, created through students' interactions with material resources such as scholarly texts written in the same domain and making comparisons between these and their own work (Nicol, 2021). The second is external feedback, which is provided through human resources such as peers and teachers (e.g. Winstone et al., 2021). Peer feedback information is created through interpersonal interactions students have with their peers while engaged in the formative pedagogical activities mentioned above. However, in the context of first-year academic writing, it is the role of teacher feedback on learning that becomes of prime concern.

The literature indicates first-year students' reliance on teacher guidance and clarification to help them scaffold their understanding of the desired standards of a particular assignment (e.g. Bird & Yucel, 2015; Rhind & Paterson, 2015). Students also need evidence to understand whether their judgements meet standards, and if not, in which areas they need to improve. Teachers thus need to make decisions on what types of feedback information to provide, and how to provide it, to engage learners more actively in evaluative practices. Various models of feedback have been proposed wherein students take a more active role in eliciting and responding to teacher feedback (Beaumont et al., 2016; Malecka & Boud, 2021). A common thread underpins the models of feedback proposed in these and other literature on feedback: for the feedback to be effective in terms of developing evaluative judgement, it should act as a mechanism through which teachers help students check their understanding of the characteristics of good work, confirm or challenge students' evaluation of a piece of work and help them improve their

evaluation skills. This would be achieved through establishing interactive feedback dialogues with students.

An example would be dialogic feedback through which students can elicit and receive feedback information at both drafting and post-completion stages of writing an assignment. At the drafting stage, feedback sessions can focus on the teacher's discussion with students about their feedback on the first draft of the assignment to help students realise major misconceptions early and scaffold their learning towards how they have performed so far and how to identify weaknesses and improve them. The teacher can also ask for, confirm or contest students' opinions about their own evaluation of the draft. The feedback session at the post-completion stage can provide opportunities for students to ask questions and discuss any misunderstandings about the information the teacher provides on their final draft and how they can apply these comments in their next assignment. Lack of time for in-class conversations is often considered a concern by many teachers. Well-designed online platforms such as discussion forums here can help them to provide a platform for students to observe and participate in feedback dialogues not only with teachers but also with other students.

How can the proposed assessment approach contribute to the development of first-year students' writing skills over time?

As discussed in the Introduction, one of the main goals of first-year assessment is to build a foundation for developing and sustaining students' skills that contribute to their future writing. Such skills, labelled as higher-order skills (Elliott et al., 2019; Hayes et al., 2017; Roald et al., 2021) emphasise the role of learners in the writing process as an active agent who is able to regulate various resources to elicit knowledge and develop their understanding and production of assignments.

The assessment approach proposed has the potential to provide students with multiple and diverse opportunities to continue to develop their writing skills. Such opportunities occur in relation to both students' internal processes such as self-reflection and their functions and interactions within a dynamic social context. Through participation in authentic evaluative judgement practices such as purposeful analysis of, and reflection on, others' texts and comparing them with their own work students could, for example, develop their awareness of how to elicit quality information from textual resources and how to apply that information to their work and improve it. Interpersonal interactions with others directed at learning about writing also have the potential for improving students' awareness of how to use human resources to plan, monitor and evaluate their writing process. Typical examples of interpersonal interactions are students' negotiation of the assignment criteria and expectations, or exchange of ideas on how to approach the task, with peers and teacher within a social platform. It has been argued that such interactions enable students to access multiple points of view and techniques from which they could learn to write and evaluate their assignment (Nicol et al., 2014; To & Panadero, 2019).

The way forward

The aim of this paper has been twofold. The first was to introduce a new perspective on an assessment approach in an academic writing context that might have the potential to help first-year assessments meet dual purposes: (1) enhancing transparency of disciplinary standards of writing and mitigating assessment shock, and (2) preparing students to more effectively traverse future writing tasks. Such an approach can formulate a richer learning context through calibrating students' capacity for making evaluative judgements. Drawing on conceptual and empirical works on pedagogical practices of academic writing and evaluative judgement, four key features of the assessment activities that can contribute to the development of evaluative judgement of academic writing have been proposed. The second aim was to provide practical considerations for educators seeking an assessment design within the first-year context that encapsulates these features.

A number of implications for both research and practice arise. The ideas presented add to our knowledge about the nature of evaluative judgement of academic writing, its constituent elements, and how it can be developed. This can help shift the focus of future research towards exploring effective interventions that assist students in the development of their evaluative judgement skills.

From the practical point of view, the proposed assessment approach can provide educators with an idea of 'what', 'how' and 'when' of designing and implementing pedagogical practices, with the focus on forms of feedback and assessment that help students with developing their evaluative judgement of academic writing. In designing such pedagogical practices, this study suggests particular attention be given to individual and social practices that prompt reflexivity and encourage negotiation with regard to explicit and implicit standards. In addition, pedagogical practices should provide opportunities for students to compare multiple performances, or compare their own performance with the work of a similar type, to form their evaluation skills. Analysing others' texts, reflecting on previous drafts of their own work and engaging with the peer feedback provided and the judgements made are examples of practices that could be helpful.

What is required for the next stage is further testing, evaluation and refinement of the proposed assessment approach in different disciplines. There is no doubt that more empirical studies are needed to explore the formative assessment practices of educators and how they can redesign writing assessment activities that align with the features of the activities described in this paper, and to successfully implement them. Key questions that need further investigation are: how can educators enact their assessment strategies to engage students more actively in evaluative practices? And how do some of their existing assessment and pedagogic practices inhibit the development of students' evaluative judgement of academic writing? Research investigating these issues might usefully adopt a longitudinal design with follow-up with students throughout a programme of study. This would assist in capturing a better understanding of the influence of pedagogical activities on students' progress in developing their evaluative judgement practices.

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