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Formative feedback and essay-writing practices for at-risk students

By

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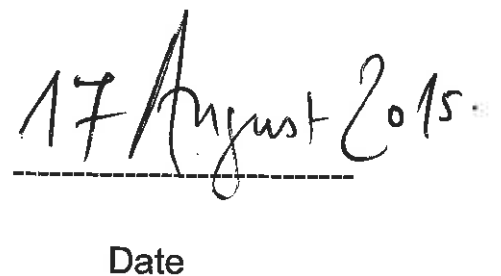
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DECLARATION

I, Emmanuel Ekale Esambe, declare that the contents of this dissertation represent my own unaided work, and that the dissertation has not previously been submitted for academic examination towards any qualification. Furthermore, it represents my own opinions and not necessarily those of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Signed

Date

ABSTRACT

In 2008, the Human Sciences Research Council declared that 'South Africa's universities graduation rate of 15% is one of the lowest in the world'. This declaration, like others, brings to the fore some of the perennial problems plaguing post-apartheid higher education institutions. Among the many challenges that first-year students in higher education face, the inability to write or communicate effectively within the student's chosen discipline, and within the university's academic traditions is prevalent and acts as a signifier of identity and power.

Against the backdrop of falling literacy standards that high school and undergraduate students represent, this dissertation explores different formative feedback strategies that lecturers and undergraduate science students at a university of technology employ during essay-writing practices. The core problématique of this study is to establish a collaborative intervention strategy as a model that could facilitate the design and dissemination of appropriate formative feedback during essay-writing practices with at-risk ECP and first-year students.

This empirical investigation is aligned to the constructivist approach. Data was collected and analysed using a qualitative cyclical action research methodology. The research sample comprised ECP and mainstream first-year students and three Dental Theory lecturers from the department of Dental Sciences. Focus group interviews and photovoice presentations were the primary source of evidence. This was supplemented by textual analysis of students' essay drafts as well as official departmental documentation relevant to essay-writing practices. Activity theory was used to interpret the findings.

Evidence suggests that the sub-activity systems that emerged during the intervention reflect procedural issues which either facilitate or constrain the design and use of formative feedback in essay-writing. Students' perception of essay-writing as an important academic achievement in their discipline and profession as well as lecturers' perception of division of labour were significant evidence in this research. This evidence confirms the view that writing in general and academic writing interventions in particular,

are informed by a skills approach in certain departments; to the detriment of learning in general, and at-risk students' success in particular. The results reveal that the action research model inspired active participation of the students and the rest of the community. The resultant collaboration altered students' and lecturers' views of the processes that inform good essay-writing practices.

This study concludes that a collaborative intervention has a positive influence on at-risk ECP and first-year students' essay-writing practices through their engagement with formative feedback. This positive influence is seen through lecturers' revision of specific artefacts such as rubrics and instructions provided to students during essay-writing practices. Finally, by emphasising the value of collaboration, channels of dialogue and content of dialogue emerging between students and lecturers regarding the use of formative feedback has been enriched.

In closing, this study foregrounds the benefits that emerged as a result of a collaborative intervention during essay-writing for at-risk first-year students. In particular, the dissertation explains how collaborative intervention exposes previous assumptions around the use of formative feedback during essay-writing and how certain spaces and practices serve as affordances for student learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my late elder sister Ma Mbone Doris Esambe and my son Mawande Fidel Ekale Esambe.

For a new star is born even as this bright one descends into eternity

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Introduction and background

1.1. Introduction

South Africa has a rich and diverse culture, people, and geography. There are eleven official languages and learners are taught in their home languages as early as primary levels (Department of Education [DoE], 1997). In a bid to redress some of the inequalities and inequities created by the apartheid regime, the post-apartheid legislature conceived the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) to reflect an important and relevant move by the government towards building a non-racial South Africa (DoE, 1997). The policy seeks to develop South African learners' to be multicultural and bilingual.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) amplifies this view when they concur in their report that the use of home languages as Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) allows for bilingual learners who perform better academically compared to monolingual learners (DBE, 2010:5). Unfortunately, after spending more than ten years in primary and secondary education, many learners are forced to register at higher education institutions whose sole language of instruction is English. Coupled with this, many learners in different South African universities are taught by lecturers with varied levels of competency in communication, and often disparate levels of awareness of some of the main discourses in academic literacy (Carstens, 2013; Van Dyk & Coetzee-van Rooy, 2012; Boughey & McKenna, 2011a). This situation becomes critical for students who register for disciplines that are perceived to be more practical and science oriented. These students typically display resistance towards writing as an element of their learning process; and their lecturers are expected to play a pivotal role in changing this perception (Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Prain & Hand, 1999).

Students who struggle with academic writing and are not adequately supported by their lecturers are at a disadvantage during written assessments and as such struggle to

complete their study programme. These students can be considered to be at-risk of failing the first-year of university education and might consider dropping out of the university altogether (CPUT, 2014). This study seeks to propose ways through which at-risk first-year students in the Department of Dental Sciences can be supported through a collaborative discipline-specific academic literacy intervention in order to improve their writing abilities.

Maxwell defines at-risk students as students who perform poorly compared to their peers in terms of key educational attributes such as knowledge, motivation, and interpersonal skills (1997). The historical and social realities of South Africa constitute several factors that account for some students being at-risk of dropping out of university. In this study, such at-risk students may be registered either in a mainstream first-year class or in an Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) class. These terms are explained further in section 1.2 below.

1.2. Background to the research problem

Students entering universities in South Africa face a number of challenges including insufficient financial support, lack of convenient accommodation, unavailability of learning resources and unequal access to technology (Bozalek, Garraway & McKenna, 2011). There is often a significant discrepancy between 'the ways of knowing' that new university students possess from school and what their university curriculum expects of them (Barnet, 2009:431; McKenna, 2004:23). These challenges should be considered as some of the key factors that have contributed to high first-year failure rates at universities in South Africa. Numerous studies completed in South Africa measure first-year failure rates as ranging between 30% and 77% (Scott, 2009; Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007; Coughlan, 2006; Grussendorff, Liebenberg & Houston, 2004; Eiselen & Geyser, 2003; and Lourens & Smit, 2003). This situation is not unique to South Africa. In the United States, the State of California's Intersegmental Committee of Academic Senates (ICAS) reports: students entering universities in California are generally 'less able to tackle difficult questions; are unable to engage in hard work, thinking, analysing; and to

communicate within the level expected of them' (2002:4). In particular, it has been noted that first-year students struggle to cope with the reading, writing and critical thinking skills required at a tertiary level of study; and as a result, some universities are 'going the extra mile' to provide academic literacy support to such students.

Academic literacy is defined as encompassing the skills to read, write, speak, listen and think; it includes dispositions and habits of mind that can propel students to academic success (Hunter, 2013; ICAS, 2002). Weideman goes further to indicate that academic literacy encompasses the following skills: to read critically and comprehend a range of texts; show sensitivity to the meaning that they convey and the audience they are aimed for; to write competently in scholarly genres; to articulate, and contribute to complex academic discussions; to identify what counts as evidence for an argument; and make distinctions between essential and non-essential information (2006:2). From the above definitions, it can be surmised that the attainment of academic literacy is a complex signifier of competencies in reading, writing, listening, speaking and the use of technology.

1.2.1. Distinguishing between mainstream first-year and ECP

In addition to the key factors mentioned, other factors that serve as constraints to under-prepared first-year students' success in the university include: lack of adequate preparation in secondary school; debilitating economic conditions; lack of support from students' immediate families and inadequate learning resources (Boughey & McKenna, 2011b). In many universities in South Africa, dropout rates at first-year level are rapidly increasing (Krause & Coates, 2008) thus forcing university management to revise their strategies in order to improve student retention and increase throughput rates in their universities. One such strategy implemented is the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP). The ECP seeks to extend the period of study by an extra academic year for students identified as underprepared for the intended programme (CPUT, 2014). Therefore, all ECP students are regarded as being 'at-risk' of not completing their National Diploma programme on time. This extra year is designed to reduce the semester course work for the students and thus create more time for remedial tutorial

sessions. In the Department of Dental Sciences, mainstream first-year students complete eight subjects per academic year while the ECP students complete five subjects per academic year. The ECP students therefore have more time for tutorials compared to their peers in the mainstream programme.

However, both ECP and mainstream first-year students face similar challenges during essay-writing practices. In the theory-based subjects where students are required to write mainly essay-based assignments, such subjects are often referred to as 'killer subjects' because students generally perform poorly in those essays compared to their practice-based subjects (see pre-intervention focus group interview in Appendix A1 for more details). Therefore, even though not all first-year students are considered at-risk of failing in the programme, this study reports on the impact of the intervention on those ECP and first-year students who were at risk of failing the Dental Theory subjects due to the challenges they face with essay-writing.

1.3. Statement of research problem

The Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC) bold declaration in 2008 that 'South Africa's university graduation rate of 15% is one of the lowest in the world' (Letseka & Maile, 2008) should not surprise those who are familiar with some of the perennial problems plaguing post-apartheid higher education institutions. Among the many challenges that first-year students in higher education face, the (in)ability to write and communicate well within the student's chosen discipline and within the university's academic traditions is prevalent (Lillis & Scott, 2007; Baynham, 2000) and acts as a signifier of identity and power (French, 2011; Engeström, 1999; Lea & Street, 1998). Clearly, if undergraduate students struggle to write and meet the demands of their discipline and the university, then there is a discrepancy between these students' 'prior learning and educational capital' (Scot, Yeld & Hendry, 2007:41) and their expectations of the programmes, resulting in these students struggling to progress in their various disciplines. When lecturers fail to establish programmes to support a continuous development of students' writing, then students will struggle to engage fully and master their disciplinary discourse.

The challenge in this study, then, is to propose a collaborative intervention strategy between content lecturers and academic literacy lecturers who could assist learners to acquire the kinds of skills they lack in their struggles with essay-writing practices. This challenge, in more specific terms, is to propose a three-tiered collaborative discipline-specific approach for the provision of formative feedback as a way of bridging the gap: by mediating students' educational capital with the discipline's prescribed essay-writing practice.

There are many interventions that have proven their worth in the provision of essay-writing support. However, one intervention that seems most relevant given the circumstances described above regarding the first-year and ECP students is the use of formative feedback for enhancing essay-writing practices. There is a large amount of research evidence asserting that formative feedback, if properly phrased and given within a collaborative system, will help to improve at-risk students' undergraduate essay-writing practice (Clark, 2012; Hyland, 2010; Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Activity theory provides a suitable lens through which to view the impact of a collaborative formative feedback intervention. This research turned to the study environment in the department to consider how a reassessment of the way formative feedback is phrased and provided by content lecturers, academic literacy support staff, the students, and computers could help improve students' essay-writing practices. Use of activity theory provided the philosophical tool to conceptualise and interpret 'different aspects of individual development and social transformation' (Toulmin, 1999:53). In the language of activity theory, this study seeks to examine how lecturers and students (subjects) interacted with formative feedback (tools) within a clearly defined setting (community) with rules and responsibilities, in order to improve essay-writing practice (object) and ultimately improve academic performance (outcome).

1.4. Research aims and questions

This research aims to implement and determine the impact of a collaborative, discipline-oriented approach in the provision of formative feedback to at-risk Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) students and at-risk first-year students in the Department of Dental Sciences in order to enhance their essay-writing practice. The collaborative approach entails a careful use of interactive tutorial sessions with student peer review, electronic provision of formative feedback in order to improve self-editing and collaboration between students, subject specific lecturers and the Writing Centre in order to enhance essay-writing practice for at-risk first-year students in the Department of Dental Sciences. Research questions generally assist the researcher to focus the study, in terms of goals and conceptual framework, and guide the conduct of it in terms of methods and validity (Maxwell, 2008).

The main research question for this study is:

How can a collaborative approach between students, lecturers and the Writing Centre in the provision of formative feedback assist at-risk first-year and ECP students to enhance their essay-writing practices?

From the main research question, the following sub-questions are interrogated:
- What influence does an interactive tutorial session, involving active student peer review and formative feedback with the use of a rubric, have on the collaborative approach?
- How does the use of electronic media to provide formative feedback to at-risk ECP and first-year students contribute to improving the collaborative approach during essay-writing practices?
- How can the core subject lecturers influence the collaborative approach in the provision of formative feedback during essay-writing practice?

1.5. A three-tiered formative feedback strategy and its rationale

This research seeks to implement and evaluate a three-tiered strategy in the provision of essay-writing skills to support to ECP and first-year students in a science department

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in a University of Technology. The proposed study involves setting up an intervention whereby ECP and first-year students work together with selected lecturers to:

- Reflect on their essay-writing practices and revise their essays using a carefully designed rubric in order to improve understanding of the relation between grammar, content, and style.

- Use electronic resources such as MS Word's Track Changes and Google Docs to edit their essays.

- Use a collaborative model involving students, discipline specific lecturers and the Writing Centre in the provision and use of formative feedback towards the development of meaning during essay-writing practice.

The proposed intervention targets the ECP and first-year students in the Department of Dental Sciences. These students are expected to progress gradually to the mainstream programme, master basic essay-writing skills which improve their academic performance, and may encourage the students to stay in the tertiary system and proceed to graduation (Archer, 2008). The above intervention makes use of available human and technological resources at no extra cost to the department. The three strategies involve the use of:

- Selected electronic media to provide formative feedback,

- Well-designed rubrics for revision, self- and peer-marking, and

- An integrative approach in the provision of formative feedback.

An action research methodology is used, which is explained further below and in detail in Chapter Three.

1.5.1. The use of rubrics for revision, peer and self-marking

From the conceptualisation discussion, lecturers complained that students do not always consider or implement suggestions made by lecturers and Writing Centre staff in order to improve their essays (See appendix **A1** and **A2** for transcripts of focus group interviews). Lecturers indicated that one of the reasons for this might be because of poor time planning. Some lecturers explained that students often leave their

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assignments until it is almost the due date before they start completing them. This often reduces the time left for students to seek or consider valuable formative feedback.

Knight (2001) regards formative feedback as a tool aimed at helping students improve their work through active engagement with constructive feedback. Peer marking, which is part of formative development, has been explored as a learning tool in higher education discourse by many scholars including Nicole and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), Biggs (2003), Yorke (2001), and Gibbs (1999). The use of rubrics as an assessment and learning tool has been tested by Andrade and Du (2005) who explore briefly the design and use of rubrics in a classroom. Jonsson and Svingby (2007) look at key aspects such as reliability, validity and impact in promoting learning, while Rezaei and Lovorn (2010) specifically studied the reliability and validity of rubrics and the training of persons who do the rating vis-à-vis assessment outcomes. It is possible to consider that self- and peer-marking using rubrics will complement the use of track changes as a means to encourage students to reflect during the writing process, improve their thinking skills and ultimately leave them with academic literacy skills that will be of use to them in the job market.

1.5.2. A collaborative model in the provision of formative feedback

Literacy is used as an operational concept in this study. This concept encompasses more than competence, which suggests the notion of innate human capacity for acquiring, using and understanding something such as language (Chomsky, 1965). Literacy implies the use of competencies to bring about the desired results: high performance and academic success. The concept of literacy relies on the social context in which given competencies are acquired. Acquisition of literacy is seen 'not in terms of de-contextualised skills and competence, but as an integral part of social events and practices' (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000:197). In this study, literacy is examined in terms of students' ability to convey meaning within their discipline.

The curriculum for the Department is designed in such a way that emphasis on English Communication as a subject is focused on students' ability to communicate effectively and efficiently as dental technologists. Morrow puts this succinctly when he explains

that success at university involves 'learning how to become a successful participant in an academic practice' (2009:17). Moll extrapolates on this model in his notion of 'curriculum responsiveness' when he indicates that, amongst other aspects, the responsiveness of a curriculum to a specific discipline depends on 'the nature of its underlying knowledge discipline by ensuring a close coupling between the way in which knowledge is produced and the way students are educated and trained in the discipline area' (2004:7). This close coupling between production of knowledge and dissemination requires that academics within a department plan the curriculum with clear critical cross-field outcomes in an integrated manner such that all the lecturers are able to support students. It demands that educators work in a collaborative manner with colleagues and students in order to foreground learning (Makoelle, 2012a).

Formative feedback during academic writing is an essential academic developmental tool (Turner, 2011). If the task of providing formative feedback to at-risk students during academic writing is left entirely in the hands of the academic literacy practitioner, the quality of feedback that the students receive might not adequately address the students' holistic academic writing concerns (French, 2011). Thus, in this study, a collaborative model involving lecturers specialised in Dental Technology, the academic and information literacy lecturers, as well as at-risk ECP and first-year students, is explored in order to provide formative feedback that will impact on the students' essay-writing skills. This collaborative model is derived from other studies that maintain such collaboration enforces learning (Jacobs, 2010).

1.5.3. Embedding other literacies into academic literacies

Today, a proficient student is one who can demonstrate competencies in the discipline for which he/she is registered, as well as competence in areas such as interpersonal skills, use of technology, and critical thinking (Paxton, 2007). This means that such a student should master different academic literacies (Clarence, 2012). Students are expected to submit essays typed according to strict formatting rules. Dental technology students are expected to integrate suitable and appropriate illustrations such as pictures, drawings, tables, charts, and graphs into their essay where and when

necessary. Finally, most of the Dental Technology theory essay questions expect students to demonstrate some form of critical thinking ability. Some academic literacy practitioners in South Africa highlight the issues around multi-literacies, and how other literacies can be embedded into academic literacy interventions (Clarence, 2012; Jacobs, 2010). This study highlights how a collaborative formative feedback intervention could form a strategy to embed other literacies such as critical literacy and digital literacy into the writing curriculum.

1.6. Research methodology

This study focuses on implementing an integrated and collaborative formative feedback intervention during at-risk ECP and first-year students' essay-writing practice. Based on the research questions mentioned in section **1.4** above, this study adopts a qualitative action research model. Data was collected using two main research methods: focus group interviews and photovoice[1] presentations, as well as two supporting research methods: students' essay drafts and departmental documentations that lecturers give to students during essay-writing practices.

All the students who registered as first-year mainstream or ECP for the 2014 academic year were invited to participate in the formative feedback intervention. Purposive sampling was employed to select 10 students whose essays were used in the study, and who conducted a photovoice presentation (see appendix **B**). Purposive sampling was also used to select three Dental Technology lecturers who teach ECP and mainstream first-year students to be part of the study. These lecturers served as participants in the pre-intervention and post-intervention focus group interviews (see appendix **A1** and **A2** respectively). They supplied the researcher with the documents that the students used during essay-writing practices.

Information from the photovoice presentations and focus group interviews form the substantive data that is analysed. This data was supplemented with the drafts of the

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[1] A photovoice presentation is a form of digital presentation in which the presenter uses photos to tell a story. This is explained in detail in Chapter 3 of this study; section 3.6.2.

students' essays during interventions, as well as documents that the lecturers provided to the students.

Data collected was analysed in two phases using a typological analysis technique[2]. In the first phase of analysis, data was explored using components of an activity system. Based on this, sub-activity systems were identified and mapped. The second phase of analysis was theory based. Using activity theory as a philosophical lens, the study established the underlying relations and factors that enabled or constrained the design, transmission and use of formative feedback during essay-writing practices. Data were then mapped into a model activity system adopted from Engeström (1999b).

The decision to use more than two methods to collect data was made in order to ensure that the data collected were sufficiently rich and detailed to meet the strict requirements of a qualitative study. This procedure enhanced the credibility and validity of the findings. All the participants in the study, both students and lecturers, were given pseudonyms in order to protect their identity.

1.7. Key terms used in this study

Three key terms: 'formative feedback'; 'ECP students'; and 'at-risk students', have been used in this study. For the purpose of clarity and consistency, they need to be explained in context.

Formative feedback has been defined by many as feedback that is provided to a learner with a clear aim: to 'show the learner where there are gaps and how to improve on the learner's work' (Bloxham & Campbell, 2010: 291). Shute (2008:153) considers formative feedback as "information communicated to the learner that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behaviour to improve learning". Later in this study, the importance of modifying thinking and/or behaviour as referred to by Shute (2008:153) will be explored.

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[2] Typological analysis is a technique whereby data is analysed via means of classifying process using groups, subsets or categories within strict criteria (Cohen et al., 2007). This is explained in detail in Chapter 3, section 3.8.

Extended Curriculum programme (ECP) refers to those students who are admitted to complete the National Diploma (ND) in four years instead of the standard three-year schedule. As reported by the Council on Higher Education (2013), the ECP is regarded as one of those measures put in place to support students who might otherwise struggle or drop out of an undergraduate programme before graduating. It is intended to increase the time that these students take to complete the ND by an additional year.

At-risk students are those students who have been identified by their lecturers during the first term of study (January to March) to be facing specific literacy challenges with their studies and a strategy is put in place to assist them.

This study constantly refers to provision of formative feedback during essay-writing practices with ECP and first-year students identified by their lecturers as being at-risk of failing in the Dental Theory subject.

1.8. Research ethics

In order for action research of this nature to be sanctioned, it was necessary to demonstrate that all the necessary research ethics issues were identified and clearly addressed. Before the research could commence, permission from the Head of Department of the Department of Dental Sciences was secured. An Ethics Clearance Certificate was issued by the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Lecturers and students[3] who participated in the study were given written informed consent forms before the commencement of the study. In order to ensure privacy and confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms were used to refer to them in the findings. Participants were consistently briefed of research progress because of its action research design. This ensured the integrity of the research process, and truthful reporting of findings. The details of these are outlined in Chapter Three.

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[3] In this research, the term participants refer to both the lecturers and the students who participated in the study. They have been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

1.9. Research outline

The research report is divided into five chapters. Chapter One is titled Introduction. It provides a background to the research, states the research questions and defines the key concepts within the research. Chapter Two presents the Literature Review and Theoretical Framework of the study. This chapter explores the state of research on key variables of this topic including essay-writing in higher education, the range of students' writing competencies, the nature and use of formative feedback in writing interventions, activity theory and the academic literacy model of writing intervention. Chapter Three is the methodology section. This chapter explains the procedure the research follows and the methods used to collect data. Chapter Four comprises the findings section. It presents and interprets the findings from the research. Chapter Five is the final chapter. It includes the conclusion and recommendations of the study. In this chapter the researcher makes suggestions as to what needs to be done to improve the intervention. Because this is an action research, there are proposals on how to monitor the strategy and the necessary evaluations that need to take place.

1.10. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter is to provide an annotated background to the research titled: A three tiered strategy in the teaching of essay-writing skills to ECP and first-year students. The research reports on teaching strategies used to deliver the essay-writing module and the impact of such strategies. This introductory chapter identifies the place of essay-writing as a distinct, important element in the academic literacy discourse within the higher education fraternity in South Africa. In this regard, this chapter highlights the integrated nature of essay-writing as a module being taught in Communication, and its close correlation with the learning demands and assessment tasks of other content subjects within the discipline such as Dental Theory and Dental Materials. The importance of good formative feedback practices during essay-writing is foregrounded.

The next chapter in this dissertation (Chapter Two) is entitled Literature Review. It presents current debates relating to teaching of essay-writing skills in universities, the

place of rubrics as learning and assessment tools in higher education, discourse on activity theory from the perspective of Engeström and the role of sound academic literacy intervention in ensuring student success and throughput rates at university.

Chapter Two

Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Introduction

Chapter One discussed the research problem, background and rationale. Chapter Two presents a review of relevant literature on key variables within this research area. These variables include: formative feedback, teaching of essay-writing skills, second and third generation activity theory, and action research within a higher education context. According to Mouton, the literature review is an important section of the research because it indicates the state of the existing body of knowledge relevant to the study being undertaken. This chapter not only explores relevant and recent research on key variables listed above, but shows how such research contributes to shaping the study being reported on. Of importance is a discussion on the development of activity theory with particular emphasis on Engeström's (1999b) model of an activity system. Activity theory is used in this research as a theoretical framework and an analytical tool by which the researcher can examine and determine the use of formative feedback as a tool by at-risk ECP and first-year students during essay-writing practices. Activity theory is used in this study because of its proven capacity to situate and analyse activity in a socio-historical context.

The literature being reviewed in this chapter can be categorised into three broad themes. The first thematic category seeks to locate the students investigated in this study within a specific socio-educational background. This section presents literature on students' perception of writing within a science discipline, the place of essay-writing within higher education discourse and the influence of students' socio-economic background to their academic writing competencies. The purpose of doing this is to locate the study within a specific background.

The second category of themes examines the definition of formative feedback, different types of formative feedback and how formative feedback has been used as intervention in essay-writing practices. This discussion demonstrates how specific rubrics enable

critical thinking and enhance essay-writing. Finally, this section looks at collaborative learning in line with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. The purpose of this category is to relate recent debates concerning the main variable of the research: formative feedback, and how it is used to enhance essay-writing for at-risk students.

The third category of themes examined in this literature review is that relating to activity theory. The origin and development of activity theory is discussed, the basic principles of activity theory are examined and the place of activity theory in praxis discourse is outlined. This section presents some of the criticism of activity theory and how other researchers respond to such criticism.

In order to select the literature being reviewed here, it was important to summarise the main variables from the research questions in this study. The following questions were asked in order to access literature that explores specific issues linked to the research problem as well as to understand key theoretical discussions in the study:

- What are students' and lecturers' perceptions of a collaborative approach in the use of formative feedback towards enhancing essay-writing practices?
- How can continuous revision and provision of formative feedback with the use of a rubric help to develop a better understanding of the relation between grammar, content, argument and style in essay-writing practice?
- How can core subject lecturers, ECP and first-year students collaborate with the Writing Centre in the provision of formative feedback in order to improve the development of meaning during essay-writing practice?
- How can activity theory be used to interpret formative feedback as a tool within an activity system?

2.2. Essay-writing and academic success in higher education

In the editorial introduction to the report: *Case studies of epistemological access in Foundation/Extended Curriculum Programme studies in South Africa*, Bozalek, Garraway and McKenna (2011) support the well-known claim that students registering at universities in South Africa face a number of challenges: financial, social, and

academic. A glaring academic challenge faced by students registering at universities in South Africa is that many of them are ill-prepared to meet the literacy demands of tertiary education (Jacobs, 2007). Jacobs (2005) explains that this challenge is most evident in terms of the difficulties students face in understanding and using the discourses of their chosen disciplines. As McKenna points out, students are expected to 'write, talk, listen, and read in ways that conform to the dominant discourse of their practices' (2004:12). Different disciplines that these students register for, require an awareness and appreciation of the 'customs and norms' which they should acquire in understanding the knowledge of their disciplines (McKenna, 2010:24).

It has been pointed out by Jacobs (2007; 2005), Gee (2003), and Webb, William and Meiring (2008) that reading, understanding and critical thinking within a discipline are often tested by means of writing exercises. This view is clearly captured in students' learner guides and essay assignment documents. The quality of a student's writing is a diagnostic indicator of the student's potential to succeed within his or her chosen discipline. This claim is further supported by the Council on Higher Education report in which it is explained that 'more than 60% of students who are registering in tertiary institutions for the first time in South Africa face serious literacy and epistemological access within their chosen institutions; and this will contribute to low throughput rates' (CHE, 2010:viii). In this study, a collaborative formative feedback practice is considered as a relevant tool in enhancing essay-writing practices of ECP and first-year students and their lecturers.

2.3. Students' socio-economic background and writing competencies

The case being made in this section is that new students registering in the university for the first time are influenced by the social settings they come from, the economic and financial stability of their sponsors, guardians or parents, as well as 'the quality of pre-university education' that they received (Boughey, 2012:134). These factors contribute to the students' academic success in general, and in particular, their writing competencies during the first-year of university study. Considering that the focus of this study is to use an action research methodology to determine the impact of formative

feedback on the essay-writing practices of ECP and first-year students, it is relevant to explore the literature that focuses on students' pre-university writing literacy capital when they enrol at university.

Many researchers indicate that there is a considerable disjunction between first-year students' 'ways of knowing', how they develop meaning and understand during academic interaction, and their expectations of the disciplines that they enrolled for (McKenna, 2010; Airey & Linder, 2009; Jacobs, 2005; McKenna, 2004). This mismatch is a result of students' educational, social, and cultural practices throughout the years leading up to university enrolment (Rohlwink, 2011). Rohlwink (2011) identifies the following reasons why students struggle with writing literacy in the first year of university education: prior schooling, method of assessment and students' self-confidence. She goes on to explain that from her interviews with some of these students, such situations become even more serious or tenuous for students coming from 'economically disadvantaged homes' who are 'forced' to study in poorly resourced schools, and who have little exposure to a culture and practice of literacy outside the school (Rohlwink, 2011:88-89). Makoelle puts it more succinctly when he states that in a social and historical context, thought is mediated by 'power relations'; and that 'oppression has many faces' (2012a:202).

This situation has been observed in other countries: as reported by the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (ICAS, 2002) in California. In the ICAS report they state that in the last twenty five years, before 2002, literacies competencies of students entering universities in California has dropped considerably due to several factors: a drop in the per capita spending for education, and decline of resources in public schools throughout California.

In another landmark study, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in South Africa makes a strong point when it claims that disparities in academic proficiency of different racial groups are a key reminder that 'disparities in educational and socio-economic backgrounds, call for widening the range of educational structures and approaches used in higher education to address the realities of different educational

backgrounds' (Scott et al., 2007:41). Davidowitz and Schreiber add to this debate by asserting that the harrowing effects of the apartheid era education system 'may still exist in historically disadvantaged schools and render students under prepared for the higher education environment' (2008:192). It is in light of these claims that the action research methodological framework employed in this study begins with a pre-intervention writing activity. This writing activity is used to identify some of the challenges that ECP and first-year students face in basic composition. An identification of some of the strengths that the students possess prior to the intervention is explored. In brief, pre-intervention writing activity helps to define students' literacy capital as well as some of the constraints they encounter in academic writing; all of which helps to tailor the intervention successfully.

2.4. Formative feedback as intervention in essay-writing

Research in the last five decades sought to challenge the view that 'learning is only the acquisition and possession of knowledge' (Pryor & Crossouard, 2010:265). The works of Lave and Wenger (1991), Lyotard (1984), and in the last twenty years, studies on pedagogy in higher education from different settings and contexts serve as practical evidence of the weaknesses of such claims (Haggis, 2006; Yorke, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). As claimed by Biggs, the practice of regarding learning as 'only the acquisition and possession of knowledge' is still alive in university teaching (2003:8). The focus of this dissertation is on the conscious use of formative feedback during essay-writing practice. In order to complete such a task successfully, an exploration into the discourse on formative assessment in general and formative feedback in particular, is vital.

In Pryor and Crossouard's paper, they reflect that the term 'formative' is broad. Within it four key purposes can be found: 'completing the task at hand, thinking about improvement, making sense of criteria, and invoking learner identities' (2010:266-267). In fact, Black and Wiliam claim that 'a formative interaction is one in which an interactive situation influences cognition' (2009:11). Within these purposes, Pryor and Crossouard examine tutors' formative feedback vis-à-vis students' responses to them, and analysed

their findings within the paradigm of 'social theory and discourses of dialogue and identity' (2010:267). Their work is important in understanding formative feedback as a dialogic developmental process that enhances learning, creativity and intellectual identity.

In another seminal work within the discourse of formative feedback, Clark asserts, drawing on more than one hundred and eighty sources, that formative assessment is a major tool for student-centered learning because it uses formative feedback to 'actualise and reinforce self-regulated learning' (2012:205). The core of Clark's work demonstrates that there now exist an expansive conceptual domain known as 'the theory of formative assessment', which shows how formative feedback plays a pivotal role in 'reinforcing self-regulated learning strategies' (2012:205). In this study, references will be made to the three aspects of feedback: formative, synchronous, and internal, as described by Clark (2012).

2.4.1. Formative, synchronous, and asynchronous feedback

Formative, synchronous, internal and external feedback are the three elements that this study examines in detail in order to understand how formative feedback is used to enhance academic writing practices for at-risk ECP and first-year students in the department of Dental Technology. Clark explains that philosophical issues such as 'discourse, identity, and power' are reflected in student writing based on the understanding that feedback should be internal and external, synchronous, and developmental (2012:209). Black and Wiliam expose the relation between these three variables when they assert that the rationale behind engaging with formative feedback is such that a learner's tacit knowledge can be expressed and utilised in required contexts by the learner (2009). Other researchers confirm this view when they explain that a student's tacit knowledge can be acquired unconsciously, is situated within the student's learning space and practice and that students are generally not communicating such knowledge (Elton, 2010; Matthew & Sternberg, 2009).

Feedback is seen to be **formative**[4] when a student interacts with a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), and such interaction leads to understanding and knowledge awareness by the learner (Black & Wiliam, 2009:11). There is an obvious quality of empowerment found in good formative feedback. Shepard (2000) claims that formative feedback empowers students and moves them towards academic excellence. This claim is supported by a post-structuralist philosophy that sees writing as an essential developmental social process. It is alleged that such practices encourage students to take control of their learning activities and fully exploit avenues for collaborative learning (Cauley & McMillan, 2010).

The strength of **synchronous** feedback is highlighted when Black and Wiliam explain that it creates 'moments of contingency' for the learner and the teacher to exploit during the learning process (2009:10). Brophy (2004) explains that it is essential for lecturers to create activities and spaces that allow students to engage actively in learning, and to receive immediate formative feedback while they are engaged in a learning activity or are present in a learning space. Characteristics of synchronous formative feedback include spontaneity and dialogue (Black & Wiliam, 2009) which should expose the way students articulate their thoughts, and defend their point of view (Black & Wiliam, 2006). Other researchers have outlined how the spontaneous nature of synchronous formative feedback allows learner and lecturer to engage in questions and answers; as well as the process of adjusting information, observation, critique, imitation, and demonstration (Schon, 1987). Where there is considerable time difference between when the lecturer identifies a problem and when that lecturer communicates that issue to the student, this is referred to as **asynchronous** formative feedback (Clark, 2012). According to Clark, asynchronous formative feedback occurs when the lecturer uses data from students' past learning activities as a form of historical analysis, as well as when the lecturer waits until the end of a learning activity before giving feedback (2012).

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[4] Black and Wiliam (2009) used the term formative, but the emphasis in bold is mine. I put them in bold in order to foreground the three key types of formative feedback used in this study.

In this study, the above types of formative feedback will be examined from the perspective of students and lecturers. There will be an examination of how formative feedback is packaged, issued and received by lecturers and students respectively, as well as when such feedback is provided.

2.4.2. Internal and external formative feedback

Clark asserts that

> Internally generated feedback is inherent to engagement and regulation. Formative assessment has the potential to reveal the internal and therefore recondite psychological and affective aspects of the learning process. Formative assessment is therefore a powerful action research methodology for the daily use of classroom teachers (2012: 213).

In order to fully grasp the above claim by Clark (2012) in the context of this study, it is necessary to recall that writing is a social practice. This means that the students who receive formative feedback from a lecturer or another MKO go through the process of decoding the feedback, and encoding a response to it. In order to encode and decode information, students and learners have to take cognizance of the social context that informs their practices (Corner, 1983).

In the work by Price et al., three key questions are asked with regards to feedback on students' writing: what is the feedback for, 'when and how' is it carried out, and 'who' uses 'what' instruments (2010:277)? In fact, they make the central claim that 'method and timing' of measurement will be dependent on purpose, but may not be straightforward (Price et al., 2010:277). Similarly, a key factor in measuring effectiveness of feedback is getting to know or understand who makes the judgement (Price et al., 2010). Their work does not centrally focus on formative feedback: they are more concerned with feedback in a general sense involving formative, summative, and

ipsatic[5] aspects. Some of the issues they raise contribute to the design of this study. One issue they raise is the question of how feedback is measured and who makes the judgement (Price et al., 2010:277). This study will consider the perceptions of the students and the lecturers with regard to the effectiveness of the formative feedback provided during essay-writing practices.

Similar to the work of Price et al. (2010), Carless examines both formative and summative feedback provided to students' written assignments and lays bare the fact that such feedback typically has a substantial effect on students' perceptions of 'discourse, power, and emotion' during assignment writing (2006:219). Carless's (2006) work is relevant to this study because it exposes some of the factors that serve as constraints to the students with regards to accessing the discourse in which feedback is presented, and how such discourse enhances other constraints such as the perception of power, and the evocation of negative emotions within the students. In this study, there will be an attempt to demonstrate how, within an action research methodological paradigm, there is a strong possibility of deconstructing such discourse and thus eliminating the negative constraints of power and emotions that the students face.

2.5. Critical thinking, rubrics, and other contested spaces in essay-writing practices

Elsewhere in this literature review, the question has been asked regarding the place of discourse, power, and emotions in the provision of formative feedback to students' written work (Clark, 2012; Pryor & Crossouard, 2010; Price et al., 2010; Carless, 2006). In this section of the literature review, the aim is to engage with some of the critical literature regarding the desire by educators to improve students' critical thinking skills; the use of rubrics in facilitating the transfer and interpretation of feedback, perception of peer formative feedback, and the place of technology in enhancing the design and dissemination of formative feedback during essay-writing practices.

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[5] Ipsatic feedback is often called feed forward. It refers to the kinds of information that are provided to a learner before the learner fully engages in an assessment task (Fisher & Frey, 2009). This is briefly explored in the Findings and Conclusion chapters of this study.

The debate on the issue of critical/deep thinking skills of students stretches from discussions on Blooms' Taxonomy to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Cazden, 1979). For the thousands of students in South Africa for whom English is a foreign, second or even third language, scaffolding[6] is a valuable tool to plan and implement writing interventions that enhance students' critical thinking skills (van de Pol, Volman & Beishuizen, 2010; Conradie, 2009). Conradie's research suggests a number of activities that can be strategically scaffolded in order to merge assessment principles with the desire to 'enhance students' ability to organise and support an argument' in their essays (2009:47).

van de Pol et al. (2010) outline six important scaffolding strategies that are worthy of mention here:

i. Feeding back: this is a scaffolding feedback strategy in which there is a general summary of a student's performance provided directly to the student.

ii. Hints: this involves use of suggestions and clues by the lecturer in order to assist the student to progress in a given task. In this case, the lecturer is not expected to solve the problem completely for the student; but rather to provide clues that could help stimulate the student's thinking.

iii. Instructing: this is a strategy whereby the lecturer provides direct instructions or explanations on how to complete a given academic task and why.

iv. Explaining: this occurs when the students raise doubts or the lecturer anticipates potential difficulties and thus provides more detailed information clarifying such problems.

v. Modelling: this is a highly valuable scaffolding strategy especially for students who have visual and/or tactile learning styles (Dunn, Dunn & Perrin, 1994:21). Modelling mostly entails a demonstration of a particular skill.

vi. Questioning: this is the act of asking students questions that require specific cognitive answers. This is one area most often used to scaffold students towards higher order thinking skills (van de Pol et al., 2010).

As important as the claims of van de Pol et al. (2010) are, they do not examine some of the contestations that exist in the process of scaffolding, especially during essay-writing

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[6] Scaffolding is a pedagogic strategy in which the teacher (in the case whereby Bloom's Taxonomy is employed) plans the lessons such that the student's higher order thinking skills are tested at the appropriate time (Rodrigues & Smith, 2014).

practices with students who are not proficient in English. Turner lays bare some of the over-riding assumptions regarding issues of proofreading as well as the process in the 'production and reception of written work' in a university environment (2011:427). Using an academic literacy model, she eloquently argues that editing and proofreading, as some of the services offered by some writing centres, are often perceived to be simple and unimportant during the academic writing process (Turner, 2011). This is further problematized by the claim that writing specialists in writing centres are often eager to differentiate and distance their profession from that of proofreading because proofreading is perceived as 'non-pedagogic'. Ethical concerns relate to the lack of learning on the part of the student who uses a proof reader, as well as the 'iniquities that arise between those who can or cannot afford to pay for proofreading services' (Turner, 2011:430). These valuable concerns have been taken into consideration in the study being presented in this study. One such concern is the harmonisation of the process of providing academic literacies support to students during essay-writing practice and the provision of proofreading services to students. These have been harmonised within the interventions presented in the methodology section in this study.

It may be difficult for anyone to contest the claim that students who graduate with well-developed critical thinking skills will constitute a unique resource contribution to society (Magno, 2010; Kuhn, 2009; Kuhn & Udell, 2007). The advantages of having critical thinking skills are seen both in terms of the individual student, and the society in which he/she operates in because they enhance the student's cognitive ability and help eliminate 'pseudo-scientific thinking' (Bereiter, 2002:6). Critical thinking is regarded as an important indicator of the competence needed for citizens of a country to participate in the daily life of their society (Johanson, 2010; Ten Dam & Volman, 2004). But, how is critical thinking reflected in students' assignment briefs, rubrics and other grading instruments? Maclellan and Soden emphasise that it is important for course designers to make explicit strategies available to students to help develop them into 'critical thinkers' (2012:448).

In this regard, according to Andrade and Du, rubrics 'capture the essence of performance in academic tasks by listing the criteria of what counts, and describing levels of quality from excellent to poor' (2005). In the last two decades there has been some tenuous disagreement about the relevance of rubrics as a grading tool within the American academe (see Livingston, 2012; Turley & Gallagher, 2008; Wilson, 2007; Kohn, 2006). Most of this acrimonious debate is captured in the American publication *English Journal*. Irrespective of the disparity of opinion, there seems to be some unanimity in the view that a well-developed rubric 'can function as a mechanism for helping students to engage in thinking about quality and authenticity' (Livingston, 2012:109). The model expressed in this study is that a well-developed rubric, designed in collaboration with other lecturers and students within a specific discipline can comprise a useful tool to make valid, fair and transparent judgements about students' writing as well as facilitating the scaffolding of interventions to improve students' deep thinking skills. This is encapsulated in the action research methodology employed in this study, and further evidenced by the discussion on the use of formative feedback during essay-writing activities.

2.6. The academic literacies model of writing intervention

Archer opines that 'the teaching of writing and academic literacies practices in higher education is inextricably linked to student access, retention, and throughput' (2008:210). Quoting extensively from Lillis (2001), Lea and Street (1998), and Street (1996), Archer argues that the academic literacies model of intervention adopted by writing centres in South African universities is well-suited for developing students' writing competencies; especially 'students who face challenges in accessing discipline specific epistemology' (Archer, 2008:221).

'Literacy' as a generic term evokes different definitions from different disciplines (Hillerich, 1976:50). Lillis and Scott regard academic literacies as the meeting-point between theory and practice, and highlight the place of discipline-specific epistemologies in understanding academic literacies practice (2007). What stands out in their work is their thorough elucidation of 'the geographical and historical context' in

which academic literacies emerge and how this 'constitutes a specific epistemology, that of literacy as a social practice and ideology, that of transformation' (Lillis & Scott, 2007:7).

Some researchers treat literacy as 'social practice' and encourage tutors to move beyond surface discussions on grammar and patterns of lexicon, into discourses on context, *disciplinarity*, and *situatedness* (Clarence, 2012; Fernsten & Reda, 2011; Lillis & Turner, 2001). Hyland uses genre approaches to explore the way language use and literacy in educational settings are related to research on texts and contexts (2002). In fact, Hyland states that 'all theories of genre rest on notions that groups of texts are similar or different, that texts can be classified as one genre or another' (2010:113). This view of genre and texts as related to the notion of modelling is discussed earlier as an aspect of scaffolding. Data collected correspond to these concepts and identify how the possible dialogic nature of argument is embedded within formative feedback that impacts on essay-writing practices. Bondi supports this view when she states that argument is always dialogic: 'not only because it presupposes the active role of an addressee, but because it involves a plurality of voices' (1999:5). Lillis advances the use of a dialogic stance with the expressed intent of recognising a diversified group of participants when she states: 'monologic goals signal a conception of the higher education community as broadly homogeneous, whereas dialogic goals are in keeping with the notions of an acknowledged heterogeneous community of participants' (Lillis, 2001:193). This is in tandem with the views expressed elsewhere in this section of the study that participants in essay-writing practice bring with them a rich amount of social, cultural, and educational capital. This knowledge affects their perceptions of power and identity when delivering formative feedback during essay-writing practices.

Power (and identity) is used in this study as a concept to denote the ideological position of a student in relation to his/her lecturer during a dialogic learning engagement. It plays a dominant role with regard to how the parties perceive each other in a university setting; and generally affects the way lessons are planned and delivered (Boughey, 2012). In cases where students perceive themselves as helpless beings, they might

expect the lecturers to assume the dominant position of power and spoon-fed them during lessons. Conversely, when students perceive themselves as active participants in a learning engagement, they tend to define their identity as students in stronger, agentic terms. In such cases, the students are both independent and collaborative learners (Hallett, 2013). The students who serve as participants in this study come from diverse pre-university schooling backgrounds. They come from diverse social and economic backgrounds. These factors influence the planning of the interventions described in this study. Later, in the Findings and Conclusion sections of the dissertation, how formative feedback interventions contribute to students' redefinition of power and identity during essay-writing is discussed.

In an attempt to connect student writing with their voices, some researchers employ linguistic and intertextual analysis of their students' writings (Paxton, 2007). From the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Language Development Group, Paxton explores the notion of students' 'interim literacies' in order to situate their writing within the context of their prior learning background, and what the students are still to attain as they progress within their disciplines (2007:48). In order to achieve this successfully, such research has considered data from UCT's Academic Literacy benchmark test in order to design effective interventions (Carstens, 2013). This collaborative model is evident in the academic literacies practices of that institution. Such collaboration foregrounds formative feedback during essay-writing practices as a dialogic process (Tuck, 2012; Nicol, 2010). This collaboration can enhance a learning-centered[7] approach to providing formative feedback during essay-writing.

2.7. Student-centered learning: potential blind spots?

Student-centered teaching is a popular term in HE discourse. It refers to a teacher's conscious attempt to consider the 'lived realities' of the learner in a classroom (Gilyard, 2012:343). In such cases, decisions around pedagogy and curriculum are oriented mainly towards the student; and are often referred to as 'student-centredness' in

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[7] Contrast is provided between 'learning-centered', 'subject-centered' and 'student-centered' approaches to teaching in section 2.7 below.

learning (Kreber, 2007). In this literature review, I have attempted to rationalise the notion of student-centered learning as a possible benefit of the intervention implemented and reported on in this study. I have made references to some critical literature in this regard. I acknowledge that there is a vast amount of literature that supports student-centered learning as a pedagogic approach such as the works of Hallett (2013) and Ferla, Valcke and Schuyten (2009). There is some opposition however, directed towards those embracing student-centered learning. Boughey (2012) asks the rhetorical question: is it possible that the discourses and practices of student-centered learning have become so normalised that they represent a hegemonic power that blinds educators to potential pitfalls? Bernstein, for example, has raised questions regarding the extreme lack of attention towards pedagogic discourses in favour of student-centered approaches (1990). Maton explores how knowledge claims of the learner and expectations of the discipline raise issues of legitimacy; especially because the subject-specific discourses of each discipline has intricate qualities that characterise that discipline's 'ways of knowing' (Maton, 2000a:148; 2000b:81).

Another approach that some critics have adopted is to argue that contemporary higher education teaching and learning is more in need of subject-centered learning than student-centered learning (Kreber, 2007). Others such as O'Brien, Mills and Cohen have built on Kreber's notion of subject-centered learning and have modified it to a 'learning-centered' approach to learning in higher education (2009:5). Such calls are often pitted against the observation that a discourse of the autonomous learner discounts the historical and socio-cultural capital that such a learner potentially brings to the university. Such a learner's success or failure in the university is perceived as a consequence of his or her 'inherent qualities', devoid of such external factors identified above (Boughey, 2012:135). Boughey and McKenna have repeatedly argued that the use of such dominant, powerful, and hegemonic discourse to justify the dismal throughput rates in universities in South Africa can be perceived as representing both 'elitist' and 'racist' tendencies (Boughey & McKenna, 2011a; 2011b).

In this study, I propose an integrated and collaborative approach in the design and dissemination of formative feedback during essay-writing practices for at-risk ECP and first-year students in a health sciences department of a university of technology. Some of these constraints arise from a solely student-centered approach. An action research methodology, explained in more detail in Chapter Three, is used to engage students fully, content subject lecturers, and support structures such as the writing centre, in a collaborative and integrated manner, using formative feedback, to improve essay-writing practices. Using activity theory as a philosophical lens, I can interpret how formative feedback serves as a mediating artefact with the students as subjects, in a discipline specific community with rules and division of labour, towards a particular object and outcome. Activity theory serves an important role as a philosophical lens in this study: it projects the content subject lecturers and writing centre staff as role players in a specific academic community with strict rules and division of labour. This gives a holistic picture in terms of the process of mediation and removes, for the time being, the spotlight focusing only on the students. McKenna puts this poignantly when she states that 'the student-centered focus on the learner has the potential to absent the academic, the department, the discipline, the knowledge, and the university – and thereby absolving them of responsibility' (2013).

2.8. The origins and growth of activity theory

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky sounded alarm about the state of educational psychology because of the 'atomistic and functional modes of analysis' that treated psychic processes in isolation (1986:1). Vygotsky pointed out the analytic challenges that educational psychologists faced in the following words:

> subjects of study was a major weakness of traditional psychology, since it made the thought process appear as an autonomous flow of 'thoughts thinking themselves', segregated from the fullness of life, from the personal needs and interests, the inclinations and impulses of the thinker (1986:10).

Vygotsky's student A.N. Leont'ev later raised questions about the eclectic state of educational psychology (Roth & Lee, 2007). Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy (1999)

explain that the Soviet cultural-historical psychologists, Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and Luria, together with Marx and Engels, used as inspiration the classical German philosophy of Kant and Hegel as foundation on which activity theory is based. They explain that activity theory adopts the dialectical materialist notions of 'activity and consciousness as dynamically interrelated', and offer a fresh perspective to the 'mentalistic and idealist views of human knowledge that claim that learning must precede activity' (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999:62).

Some scholars consider activity theory as a 'developing body of knowledge' (Hardman, 2005:380) that provides insights into understanding of learning as transformational, rather than 'transmissional' (Engeström, 1996a:252). Reading through the works of Russel (2002), Cole (1996), Cole and Engeström (1993), the following key principles are typical of activity theory:

a) Human behaviour and activity: Cole and Engeström explain that there is a 'collective view' of human activity and that there is a social realm from which all human behaviour originates (1993:5).

b) Mind and activity: It is also claimed that the human mind is 'social', and that collective social activities help the mind to grow (Cole & Engeström, 1993:6).

c) Tools as mediating artefacts: Tools are things that aid in the transformation process, and can be 'physical or mental' (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999:63). Within the discourse of activity theory, tools are bearers of 'socio-historical meanings'; and as such, they act as mediating artefacts in our psychology (Cole & Engeström, 1993:6).

d) Developmental transformation: At the core of activity theory is the underlying view that subjects interact with artefacts/tools towards a given object, and that within the context of a given set of rules and division of labour, the outcomes to be seen by the community will be positively transformational. Such a transformation could be noticeable in terms of 'history, individual, or moment to moment' (Russel, 2002:65).

e) 'Cause and effect' versus 'mind in activity' views of science: fundamentally, activity theory is. in opposition to the widely-held cause and effect explanatory science, and rather favours the view that the human mind acts within the context of a given activity and that the focus should be on the interpretation of such activities (Cole, 1996:104).

f) Contradictions and disturbances: Roth and Lee (2007:203) explain that an activity system will typically harbour 'internal contradictions' because they are essentially dialectical in nature. Engeström notes that disturbances and contradictions occur when 'there are deviations from standard scripts' in studies within an activity theory framework (1996b:201).

The six principles summarised above indicate how activity theory has developed and some of the critically contested areas that researchers are interested in currently. Engeström's focus in analysing an activity system differs remarkably to that of Vygotsky because Engeström is also interested in variables such as rules within the community and how division of labour affects this analysis. To make full meaning of an activity theoretical discourse, the researcher should be able to explicate data within a unit of analysis: an activity system.

2.8.1. The unit of analysis: an activity system

An activity system, referred to as an 'activity triangle' (Engeström, 1991:8), is a model used by activity theorists to reveal the 'socio-material' resources that saliently manifest in an activity (Engeström, 1999a:20). In simple terms, an activity system comprises a person or persons who use carefully selected artefacts/tools to act on a particular problem space or object within a given community. Such individuals are guided by clearly defined rules and responsibilities are shared (Hardman, 2005). A typical activity system, as described above, is often attributed to the works of 'second generation activity theorists' (Roth & Lee, 2007:197). Engeström clarifies this stance further when he states that

> I have suggested that the evolution of activity theory may be seen in terms of three generations, each building on its own version of the unit of analysis. The first generation built on Vygotsky's notion of mediated action. The second generation built on Leont'ev's notion of activity system. The third generation, emerging in the past fifteen years or so, built on the idea of multiple interacting activity systems focused on a partially shared object (2008:6).

This shift in the representation of an activity system as a unit of analysis reflects the evolution of the theory and how some of its principal proponents adopt it to the changing socio-historical discourses they engage in. Figure 2.1 below depicts a visual representation of an activity system with the constituent terminology – subject, object, means of production (tools), division of labour, community, exchange, distribution, and consumption (Roth & Lee, 2007:197; Engeström, 1999b:379; Engeström, 1996b:226).

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Tool

Subject

Object → Goal (outcome

Rules

Community

Division of Labour
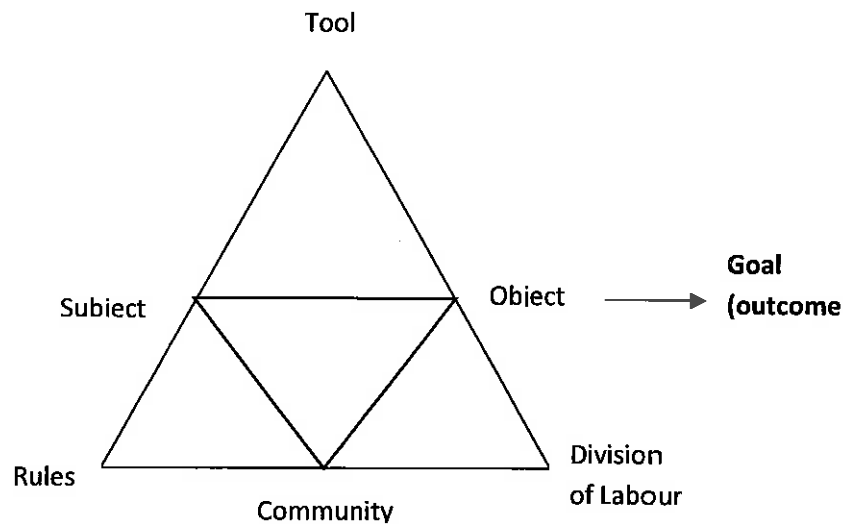
Figure 2.1: Engeström's model of an activity system as a unit of analysis (Engeström, 1999b:379).

The focus in this study is on an exploration of how the subjects, at-risk ECP and first-year students, use available means, formative feedback, tutorials, computers, meeting consultations, within the parameters of a given set of rules in the department, in order to problematize their essay-writing practices collaboratively. There is a marked division of labour among the members of the community. The assumption within this study is that the introduction of a collaborative model of formative feedback to mediate in essay-writing practices of ECP and first-year students will potentially cause a shift/change in the activity systems of the ECP and first-year essay-writing classes, challenge the existing (historical) operationalised ways of acting on the object (student essay-writing practices), thus requiring new ways of acting.

2.8.2. Adaptation of the activity triangle mapping in this study

In this study, various variables of the activity triangle are examined to determine how they impact on each other during a specific activity within an activity system. An **activity** in this study refers to students and lecturers interacting during essay-writing practice. Students and lecturers constitute the **subjects** in this study. The **tools** available to them are the formative feedback that they generate and share, the tutorial sessions, rubrics,

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and student-lecturer consultations. The **object** of the activity is for them to improve their essay-writing practices within a clearly-defined **community** which includes students, lecturers, academic support staff and examiners. The **division of labour** is between the students, lecturers, and academic support staff. A set of explicit and implicit **rules** are identified, namely: due dates of assessment, participation, collaboration, and attendance.

Tools: Formative
feedback, rubrics, tutorials

Subject

Students & lecturers

Object

Improve
essay-
writingpractic

Goal (outcome)

Improved academic
performance

Rules

Explicit and implicit
rules: due dates,
attendance and
participation.

Community

Students, lecturers, & academic
support staff

Division of Labour

Duties assigned to
members of the
community
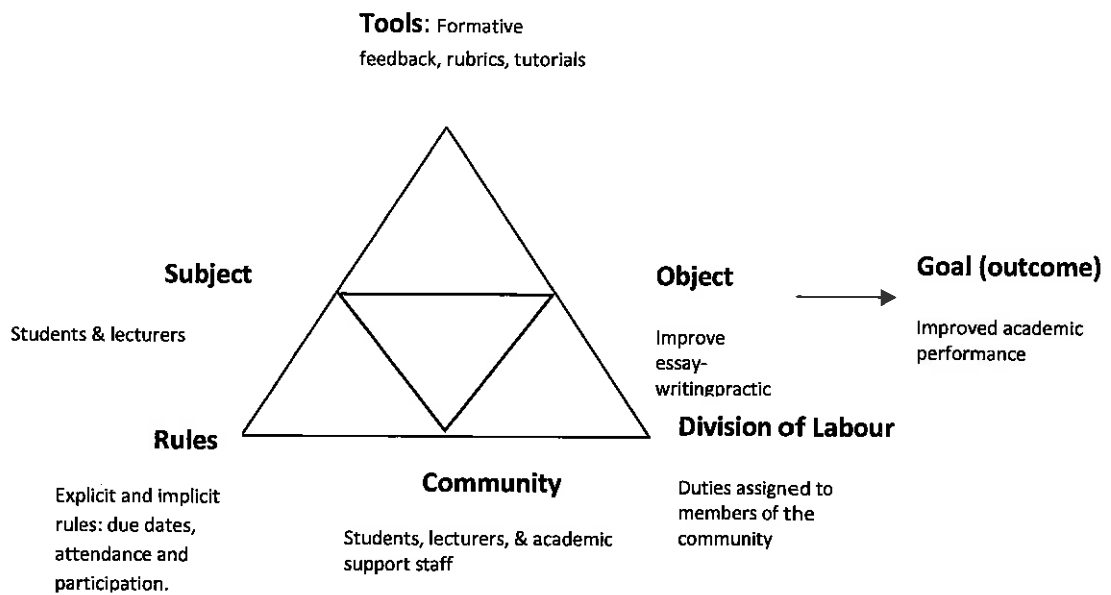
Figure 2.2: An activity system as applied in this study

2.9. Praxis in activity theory

Activity theory, described as 'one of the best kept secrets of the academia' (Roth & Lee, 2007:186) provides its users with a socio-cultural and socio-historical lens to analyse human activity systems (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999:62). According to Kuutti, activity theory is a 'philosophical framework for studying different forms of human praxis as developmental processes, both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time' (1996:532). Praxis, on the other hand, is defined by Zuber-Skerritt as 'the interdependence and integration – not separation – of theory and practice, research and development, thought and action' (2001:15). In order to fully understand the discussion

on the different elements that make up an activity system as discussed above, it is important to elaborate briefly on some key aspects of activity theory and explain why it is referred to as a praxis-based theory.

Engeström explains that because activity theory has, over the years, had as primal focus issues of 'material and work-related activity against language and theory', it has become a well sought after tool by educators (1999b:378). This view is echoed by Roth and Lee when they assert that activity theory 'as a guiding framework allows for a questioning of structural determinations of current educational practices' (2007:214). In section **2.7** above, mention was made of issues of power and identity when examining student writing and the practices that inform them. These issues are even better understood when activity theory is used as a philosophical lens to probe their manifestation. Wenger explains that, in the pursuit of an object, the subject not only produces outcomes, but sometimes they also 'produce or reproduce themselves' (1998:33). This implies that the almost constantly changing 'modes of participation in social practices – learning in a broad sense – presupposes both what we *become* and how we *act* as knowers' (Roth & Lee, 2007:215). In this study, it is appropriate to determine how the participants' identities are affected or changed and how this influences their essay writing as a result of the tool mediated outcome: use of formative feedback.

The concept of power within social practice discourse is linked to that of emotion. Leont'ev illustrates this when he asserts that emotions constitute an integral component in the operation of an activity system: they mirror connections between 'motives (needs) and success, or the possibility of success, of realising the action of the subject that responds to these motives' (1978:120). Several other activity theorists caution that educators should not separate or 'disconnect' emotional from cognitive issues (Roth, 2007:93; Roth & Lee, 2007:214). The claim is that a student's future in the world, and control over his or her life, are attributes that are 'associated with positive emotional valence', and that a student's current emotional state 'constitutes a context for the selection of meaningful actions and operations that realise them' (Roth & Lee,

2007:215). Engeström makes reference to authority, coordination and negotiation when he unpacks the issue of knowledge and power on a case study. He asserts that 'one gains authority and agency by being recognised by a community' (2008:16). The collaborative model in the design, transfer and use of formative feedback proposed in this study seeks to use formative feedback as a tool to move the students' writing practices from the peripheries to the centre of their academic literacy practices in the department.

2.10. Criticisms of activity theory

Activity theory, though seen today as a widely-used theory within education settings, has received some criticisms: notably from Toomela (2000; 2008). In his two articles cited above, Toomela identifies five critical weaknesses in activity theory:

i.   That it makes use of a unidirectional rather than a dialectical analysis of culture-individual relationships.

ii. Within the analyses of the activities, activity theory does not consider at the same time the individuals involved.

iii. The role of signs and the necessity to interpret sign meanings are not focused on in activity theory.

iv. There is a marked fragmental interpretation of the mind, and there is an absence of a holistic knowledge of it.

v.   Because it is an 'adevelopmental theory', it is not appropriate for understanding emerging phenomena such as the mind (2008:289).

Based on the above five weaknesses of activity theory as outlined by Toomela first in 2000 (Toomela, 2000) and re-enacted eight years later (Toomela, 2008), Toomela announced the demise of activity theory. This assessment by Toomela has received substantial opposition from other activity theorists notably Roth and Lee (2007) and Engeström (2009). Roth and Lee used quantitative statistics from search engines around the world in order to 'graphically demonstrate' the marked increase in critical sources of citations to notable activity-theoretical terms, texts, and authors between 2000 and 2005 (2007:180). They argue that, based on such figures, activity theory is becoming more popular in academic circles. Engeström questions why Toomela elects

to ignore the statistics provided by Roth and Lee and to repeat his 'forecast' again eight years later (2009:3). He summarises Toomela's efforts to simply being the result of 'a peculiar form of scientific autism' (Engeström, 2009:3). Engeström elaborates on the significance of 'runaway objects' (2009:4) that have helped establish activity theory not just within educational settings, but in major corporate entities. Conversely to Toomela's predictions of academic extinction, activity theory survived and is thriving.

2.11. Conclusion

This chapter has explored some of the key literature pertaining to the central variables in this study: the place of essay-writing in higher education, the academic literacies approach to teaching essay-writing in higher education, formative feedback as dialogic collaborative interventional tool, as well as rubrics and their use as a contested space. Activity theory serves as the philosophical lens in this research and was explored with particular attention to the unit of analysis: an activity system. Chapter three presents the methodological approach employed in this study.

Chapter Three

Research design and methods

3.1. Introduction

Chapter One of this study provided an overview of the methodology used in this research. This chapter provides a narrative of the research process. Bloomberg and Volpe explain that research methodology expounds on the research process and the types of 'tools and procedures' to be used (2008:65). The way in which this investigation was conducted, and the approach used to analyse the evidence collected, is provided in the following sections of this chapter.

3.2. Overview of information needed

From the beginning of this research, streamlining the research methodology within the objectives of this study and its associated research questions was important. Deep reflections on the purpose of this study influenced the decisions taken with regards to the methodology. The main objective of this study was to implement and determine the impact of a collaborative approach in the provision of formative feedback to at-risk ECP and first-year students in a dental sciences department at a University of Technology. In pursuance of this objective, the main research question identified was:

How can a collaborative approach between students, lecturers, and the Writing Centre in the provision of formative feedback to at-risk ECP and first-year students enhance their essay-writing practices?

Based on this research question, the following sub-questions were asked:

- What influence does an interactive tutorial session involving active student peer review and formative feedback with the use of a rubric have on the collaborative approach?
- How does the use of electronic media to provide formative feedback to at-risk ECP and first-year students contribute to improving the collaborative approach during essay-writing practices?

- How can the core subject lecturers influence the collaborative approach in the provision of formative feedback during essay-writing practice?

The main research question was targeted towards a collaborative intervention in order to empower and improve conditions in a specific setting: an action research methodology was adopted. This research is designed as qualitative cyclical action research. The data to be used in this research were collected over a period of five months. This is explained in detail in **section 3.6** and supported by illustrations in **Table 3.3** and **Figure 3.1** below.

Some researchers have defined action research as 'a systematic study that combines action and reflection with the intention of improving practice' (Cohen et al., 2007:297; Ebbutt, 1985:156). Cohen et al. are more specific in their definition of action research when they describe it as 'a small-scale intervention in the functioning of the real world and a close examination of the effects of such intervention' (2007:297). The action research approach selected in this study raises three fundamental issues with regard to: the setting of the intervention, the participants involved, and the theory that informs the analysis of the data (Cohen et al., 2007). Based on these three issues, the four areas of qualitative data outlined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) were adopted. These are explained below.

3.2.1. Contextual information

According to Bloomberg and Volpe, contextual information denotes the context within which the research participants reside (2008). This type of information, especially within the context of qualitative action research, highlights the culture and environment of the setting and how these factors influence behaviour. Quoting from Lewin (1935), Bloomberg and Volpe explain that 'human behaviour is a function of the intersection of the person and the environment' (2008:70). This view is especially relevant to this study because the study has examined the learning behaviour of a particular group of students – at-risk ECP and first-year students. These students operate within the Department of Dental Sciences that has specific parameters for conducting student learning activities and for being a student. The main contextual information was

collected during the pre-intervention focus group interviews with three subject lecturers. Additional contextual information was collected from three specific documents: students' pre-intervention essay, the Learner's Guide, and the standard Department of Dental Sciences assignment rubric.

3.2.2. Demographic information

Demographic information refers to participant profile information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). This information includes students' prior schooling, competence in academic writing, age, gender, and ethnicity. In this study, demographic information is used to draw similarities and differences between ECP and first-year students' perceptions of formative feedback, the way such feedback is phrased and delivered, and its impact in terms of their understanding of essay-writing. Demographic information was collected during the photovoice presentation. Such demographic data enhance analysis of the challenges that the students faced during the essay-writing activities.

3.2.3. Perceptual information

In the collaborative action research intervention conducted, the perceptions of the participants with regards to the phrasing, transmission, and impact of formative feedback during essay-writing practice is of relevance. It is important for participants to describe their learning realities during essay-writing practice, and how these experiences influenced their decisions, attitudes, and actions during the intervention (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Bloomberg and Volpe emphasise that perceptions should not be seen as facts in themselves, rather they should be considered as 'long-held assumptions of one's world view that influence their frame of reference' (2008:71). In this study, perceptual information was obtained from two primary sources: focus group interviews with lecturers and students' photovoice presentation. During these two activities, information was obtained that highlighted the participants' view of the use of formative feedback during essay-writing practices.

3.2.4. Theoretical information

Central in the literature provided in Chapter Two of this study is background information regarding the development and use of activity theory in educational research. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008:71), theoretical information serves to:

- Support and provide evidence with regards to the chosen methodological approach;
- Provide theories related to the research questions and conceptual framework;
- Provide support for the interpretation and analysis of data
- Provide support for the conclusions that are drawn and recommendations suggested.

In this chapter, connections between the research questions and the methods used to collect data to answer those questions are overtly stated. In this study, the written formative feedback provided to the students' essay drafts by lecturers, and by students during revision, was juxtaposed with the variables of activity theory. Interpretation then focuses on how such formative feedback serves as a tool to mediate the improvement of the ECP and first-year students' essay-writing skills in order to improve their academic writing and enhance academic success.

In **Table 3.1** below I summarise the four categories of information needed.

Table 3.1: Categories of information needed and methods; adopted from Bloomberg and Volpe (2008)

No.	Type of information	Research question	Information needed	Methods
1	Contextual, perceptual, and theoretical	Can a collaborative approach between the students, lecturers, and the Writing Centre in the provision of formative feedback to at-risk ECP and first-year students enhance their essay-writing practices?	Lecturers' perceptions of current essay-writing practices. Students' pre-university competencies in academic writing. Lecturers and students' awareness of the use of formative feedback to enhance learning. Lecturers and students' awareness of a collaborative approach to essay-writing.	Focus group interviews with lecturers. Pre-intervention essay-writing with students. Documents: rubrics & Learner Guides Photovoice presentation by students.
2	Demographic,	To what extent can continuous revision	Descriptive information	Focus group

	perceptual, and theoretical.	and the provision of formative feedback with the use of a rubric help to develop a better understanding of the relation between grammar, content argument and style in essay-writing practice?	based on participants' experiences during essay-writing practices. Students' perceptions regarding the usefulness of formative feedback provided during essay-writing practices. Lecturers' perceptions regarding the usefulness of the formative feedback provided during essay-writing practices.	interviews with lecturers. Drafts of students' essays containing written formative feedback. Documents: rubrics. Photovoice presentation by students.
3	Contextual, perceptual, and theoretical.	How can the core subject lecturers and the ECP and first-year students collaborate with the Writing Centre in the provision of formative feedback in order to improve the development of meaning during essay-writing practice?	Specific data on the organization and due dates set by the Department of Dental Sciences with regards to the completion and submission of assignments. Lecturers' and students' perceptions of the protocol in place with regards to submission of assignments. Lecturers' and students' views with regards to writing competence as process driven and developmental.	Focus group interviews with lecturers. Documents: Learners' Guide and rubrics. Photovoice presentation by students.

Cohen et al. (2007) explain that qualitative action research designs allow the researcher to modify elements of the design as the research progresses. Two important considerations arose during the pilot stages of this research and required reflection and revision as the research progressed. These are:

- *The focus of the central research question*: At this point of the research process the research question was well defined, but it required that I reflected deeply on the types of information needed and the methods best suited to collect such information. Without a clear specification of the type of information needed, judgment with regard to the methods selected might be erroneous and mislead the interpretation. The methods selected are precise and appropriate in terms of the types of information needed.

- *The research sample*: It was important to ensure that participants selected to be part of this research are suited to make meaningful contributions in terms of data needed, and the action research paradigm.

- *Duration of the action research intervention*: During the pilot study, the entire intervention was conducted from January to September 2013. In the post-intervention discussion with the participating lecturers, it was agreed that due to time constraints, the intervention should be conducted between January and May 2014.

In light of the above, it is now important to identify and explain the rationale for the research sample.

3.3. Research sample and participants.

Cohen et al. note that good research is often sustained not only by the soundness of its methodology and choice of instruments, but by how resourceful the 'sampling strategy' is (2007:100). This research is an action research; therefore, all ECP and first-year students registered for the 2014 academic year in the department were invited to participate in the learning activities throughout the five phases of the action research project.

Purposive sampling was used to select the content-subject lecturers who participated in this study and took part in the focus group interviews. From the lecturers selected, one is lecturing to ECP students only, and one is lecturing to first-year students only, while the third is lecturing both ECP and first-year groups. The three lecturers selected provided data that is representative of the five lecturers employed to teach ECP and first-year groups for 2014; in terms of how these lecturers design and use formative feedback during essay-writing practices with their students.

Ten out of the thirty registered students were purposively sampled to present a photovoice[8] reflection on how they have received, interpreted and used formative feedback; and in particular, how such feedback impacted on their essay-writing practices. Of these ten selected students, five were from ECP, and five from the first-

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[8] Discussion on the use of photovoice presentation is explained later in this chapter.

year group. Out of the ten students selected, four of them were those students who made remarkable progress after formative feedback intervention; another four made little progress after the intervention. The remaining two students had made average progress after the intervention. The level of students' progress was based on the students' performances in the pre-intervention writing activity, during the intervention writing activities, and the final term essay submitted after the intervention. The students' essays during this research were assessed collaboratively by the three lecturers participating in the study.

3.4. Research design

This research is designed as qualitative action research. This approach is supported by researchers who argue that in the field of education, action research is naturally suited as a 'critical praxis' (Makoelle, 2010:36; Cohen et al., 2007:301). Maxwell supports this view by stating that, in terms of the philosophical worldview, this research can be considered to reflect both the 'social constructivists' and participatory paradigms (2008:224). This is possible because the research borrows modules from both paradigms. These modules are fully compatible.

3.4.1. Action research within the praxis paradigm

Creswell considers social constructivism as a typical approach to qualitative research in which people create 'subjective meanings of their experiences' and direct such towards specific objects or things. These meanings 'are negotiated socially and historically' (1997:8). In the same vein, Makoelle (2012b; 2010) Neuman (2000), Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) and Creswell (1997) consider a participatory/advocacy worldview as a philosophical paradigm in which the research has a clear intent towards action that will lead to change (reform) in the lives of 'the participants, the institutions in which the individuals work and live, and the researcher's life' (Neuman, 2000:32). Creswell explicitly advises that in participatory research, the researcher uses a collaborative model in which the 'participants help to design questions, collect data, analyse information or reap rewards of the research' (1997:10). This research borrows from the above two paradigms because, in determining the use of formative feedback by

students, content lecturers and the Writing Centre, the qualitative approach helps the researcher to better understand 'the processes by which phenomena takes place' (Maxwell, 2008:232).

According to Remenyi and Money, action research requires a researcher to 'initiate an intervention towards a pre-agreed objective with the help of individuals who are employed by the organisation' (2004:85). In this regard, my roles as the researcher were to organise and facilitate meetings with lecturers; as well as facilitate meetings and tutorials with the ECP and first-year students during essay-writing practices. I was concerned to create an atmosphere that encourages the use of formative feedback during essay-writing practice sessions. French and Bell (1978) define action research as 'the process of systematically collecting data about an on-going system' that relates to an 'objective, goal or need of that system; feeding these data back into the system'. They regard action research as a process of 'taking action by altering selected variables within the system based both on the data and on hypostudy; and evaluating the results of the action by collecting more data'. Stringer contends that:

> Formally, then, action research in its most effective forms, is phenomenological (focusing on people's actual lived experiences/reality), interpretive (focusing on their interpretation of acts and activities), and hermeneutic (incorporating the meaning people make of events in their lives). It provides the means by which stakeholders – those centrally affected by the issue investigated – explore their experience, gain greater clarity and understanding of events and activities, and use those extended understanding to construct effective solutions to the problem(s) on which the study was focused (2007:20).

This research focuses on the formulation and use of formative feedback by at-risk ECP and first-year students: the content lecturers and academic literacy support staff within the department. Emphasis is on formative feedback, an element of formative assessment, because, in line with action research, one of the goals of formative feedback is to monitor student learning, and provide 'on-going feedback' that can be used by the lecturer and the student to improve their teaching and learning practice respectively (Suskie, 2009:24). Action research is suitable because the research is in a specified context in which the participants intend to improve practice, over a period of

time, by identifying a problem, determining an intervention, implementing the intervention, and observing the outcome of the intervention (Stringer, 2007).

3.4.2. Qualitative research

In research, it is generally important to consider the type of evidence required to answer specific research questions (Pather, 2008). Researchers are thus expected to make a choice between 'quantitative or qualitative', or a mixture of the two approaches (Maxwell, 2008:12). After serious consideration of the research objectives and research questions, it was decided that qualitative data will be best suited to answer the research questions.

Qualitative researchers arrive at findings by pursuing the appreciation of deeper meanings elicited from 'experiences and emotions' rather than statistical imputations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998: 35). In terms of the action research paradigm used in this study, qualitative research supports this as discussed in section 3.2 above.

In **Table 3.2** below, key descriptors or qualitative research process as discussed by Wiersma and Jurs (2005) are summarised and applied to this study.

Table 3.2: A description of qualitative research & its application to this study

The qualitative approach	As applied to this study
Qualitative research is very descriptive because it draws a conclusion from a very specific event/ situation.	My study examines student-lecturer interaction with formative feedback in order to determine how to improve essay-writing practices.
A qualitative approach enables the researcher to observe subtle events that may be difficult to measure through other methods.	To elicit the students' perceptions of formative feedback in a manner convenient and comfortable for the students, I used photovoice presentation because of its adaptability, graphic appeal, and its combination of personal narration and graphics.
Research is conducted in natural settings and the meaning derived from the research is therefore specific to that setting and its conditions.	I chose a qualitative action research approach because I wanted the results and recommendations to have a specific positive benefit to the students, lecturers and the Department of Dental Sciences.

The descriptions above informed this research in terms of the methods used to collect data.

3.5. An overview of the research setting

The Department of Dental Sciences provides a suitable setting in which to investigate the use of formative feedback during essay-writing practices with at-risk ECP and first-year students. The Writing Centre in the University provides writing intervention workshops to ECP, first-year and other undergraduate students in order to bridge the gap between high school literacy competence and undergraduate expectations (CPUT, 2014). The collaborative approach in the provision of formative feedback to at-risk ECP and first-year students is an intervention designed by the Writing Centre of the University. This collaborative intervention was implemented in the first year of the National Diploma programme in Dental Technology from 2013. This is a diploma programme in which the ECP cohort completes it in four years while the mainstream cohort completes it in three years. Both the ECP and the mainstream cohorts are expected to pass Communication for Dental Sciences in the first-year of registration. Both the ECP and first-year students are expected to submit a minimum of two research essay assignments per semester.

The following sections describe the aims and objectives of the collaborative formative feedback intervention, how at-risk students were identified, and how the formative feedback intervention was implemented.

3.5.1. Aims and objectives of the collaborative formative feedback intervention

The collaborative formative feedback intervention was designed with the following aims in mind:

- To identify ECP and first-year students who were academically at risk of failing the theory components of their study programme due to poor academic writing skills;
- To assist the at-risk ECP and first-year students to develop their academic literacy skills in order to cope with the theory component of their study programme;

- To instil confidence in the ECP and first-year students to collaborate and interact with their lecturers and academic support staff during essay-writing practices (CPUT, 2012).

The specific objectives of the intervention were to:

- Design a system of early identification of at-risk students in the first month of their academic registration;
- Provide formative feedback to the students in a way that the students can improve their knowledge and practice of academic writing;
- To create an atmosphere of collaboration and continuous dialogue between lecturers and students in order to enhance the students' academic literacy competencies (CPUT, 2013).

3.5.2. Identifying academically at-risk students

This collaborative, formative feedback intervention targets all ECP and first-year students in the Department of Dental Sciences. Particular emphasis and attention was placed on such students who were at-risk of failing the theory component of their programme. At risk students were defined as students with 'deficit or limited' competence in specific skills, knowledge areas, academic abilities or motivation (Maxwell, 1997:42). Working within the tenets of this definition, the lecturers in the department used the following criteria to identify ECP and first-year students who are at risk of failing Dental Theory which is a major subject of their programme:

- Students who passed grade 12 English with less than 60%;
- Students who performed poorly in the writing component during interviews for admission to study Dental Technology;
- Students who are returning to study after a long period of absence, with or without grade 12 English (CPUT, 2014).

3.5.3. Implementation of the collaborative formative feedback intervention

The collaborative formative feedback intervention was synchronised with the learning outcomes of Dental Theory 1 for ECP and first-year students. These students had two tutorial sessions per week with each session lasting forty-five minutes. An extra thirty

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minutes of tutorial time was allocated to the students who were identified as at risk of failing the subject by their lecturers. The total time used for the formative feedback intervention adds up to nine hours of tutorial sessions within the five-month period used for this intervention.

The formative feedback intervention tutorial followed the same syllabus as outlined in the Subject Guide for Communication with regard to academic writing (see Appendix C1). The tutorial content included the following:

- Planning and topic analysis
- Introduction and conclusion
- Sentence structure and paragraph development
- Argument and voice
- Harvard referencing (in-text and reference list)
- Drafting, revision and peer editing.

The learning materials used during the formative feedback intervention were developed by the Writing Centre. Copies of the PowerPoint slides and hand-outs are attached in Appendix C2. The topic for the essay assignment was the same for both the ECP and first-year group: the same lecturers graded the essays for specific subjects. A schedule was provided for the students to follow with regard to consultations with the lecturers and with the Writing Centre during the completion of the essay assignments.

This study is the outcome of a collaborative commitment to improve essay-writing practices for the ECP and first-year students and to reverse the high failure rates experienced by ECP and first-year students in their theory assignments.

3.6. Research methods

The act of writing an academic essay by a student yields a tangible product: the essay. The formative feedback provided to students during essay-writing practices by the lecturers and other support structures is tangible. However, the design and delivery, and use of this feedback and its impact on the students' final essays are often hard to determine. This research employed the following qualitative research methods: focus

group interviews, texts and documents, and photovoice presentation. These methods were employed to access rich data on how formative feedback is designed, used and its impact on ECP and first-year students' essay-writing practices.

3.6.1. Focus group interviews

The three content subject lecturers who participated in this study took part in two focus group interview sessions: one during the planning phase (November – December 2013), and the other during the post-intervention phase (May 2014). Focus group interviews were chosen as a preferred method to gather data from the lecturers as a research tool in the context of this study. Focus group interviews create ideal spaces for lecturers to brainstorm the challenges that they and the students face during essay-writing practices; as well as to establish a collaborative approach towards solving such challenges (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Brown et al. (1989), quoted in Patton, explain that 'groups are not just a convenient way to accumulate individual knowledge of their members; they give rise synergistically to insights and solutions that would not have come about without them' (1990:43). This assertion by Brown et al. (1989) supports one of the key tenets of action research methodology which is to bring people together to work towards solving a common problem as a team (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2003). The two focus group interviews were facilitated by a lecturer from the Business Faculty in order to ensure that the participating lecturers spoke freely and were not influenced by the researcher's presence.

The advantages of this type of technique according to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) are that:

- Respondents work as a team and respond to the same questions, thus allowing the interviewer to compare responses;
- It reduces the possibility of bias on the part of the interviewer;
- Shy respondents or those who might feel insecure in the research process gain the confidence of the team;

- The dialogue flows in a coherent manner especially when the group is small and manageable.

A typical weakness of focus group interviews is that some respondents might want to dominate the conversation. This causes 'less assertive' respondents to remain quiet throughout the presentation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008:78). During the focus group interviews, the interviewer was able to facilitate interviews in such a way that all the respondents were given a fair chance to respond to each question. (Refer to Appendix **A1** and **A2** for the transcripts of the two focus group interviews.)

3.6.1.1. Interview questions and schedule

The focus group interviews aimed to elicit responses from lecturers on several issues relating to formative feedback during essay-writing practices. As seen in **Table 3.1** and **Table 3.3**, two focus group interviews were conducted – the first one was on Friday 6 December 2013, and the second interview was on Thursday 22 May 2014. The decision to have two focus group interviews is in line with the action research principle of pre-intervention 'conceptualisation' discussion and post-intervention 'evaluative' discussion (Stringer, 2007:7).

Interview questions were guided by the six components of activity theory: subject, object, community, tools, rules, and division of labour. Based on the research questions for this study, the interview questions were aimed at drawing responses from interviewees in order to facilitate understanding of the activities involved in the use of formative feedback during essay-writing practices.

3.6.2. Photovoice presentation

A photovoice (PV) presentation is a form of presentation in which the presenter uses photographs to tell a story (Castleden & Garvin, 2008; Wang & Burris, 1997; 1994). The presenter does not always describe what is visually captured in the images: but seeks to evoke 'deep interpretations' by narrating the 'symbolic' and/or historical significance that the pictures capture (Kuratani & Lai, 2011:13).

Palibroda, Krieg, Murdock and Havelock explain that 'photovoice is a ground-breaking method adopted in participatory action research' (2009:ii). Based on the reports on the use of photovoice by the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence (PWHCE), Palibroda et al. (2009) outline the following advantages of using photovoice. Participants:

- gain valuable skills through reflecting on the realities of their lives and participating in decision-making and problem-solving;
- develop skills in reflecting on and understanding community functioning;
- build a connection between the personal and the political by improving their knowledge of how the individual experience is part of the whole;
- improve their ability to express their ideas and engage in advocacy
- improve their self-esteem from skill-building projects such as the use of photography for advocacy.

For this research, ten students (five from ECP and five from the first-year group) collected five pictures per student, and used those pictures to provide a short narrative of how they perceived formative feedback during the essay-writing activity that they completed. They explained how they interpreted and used the formative feedback that was provided, and what they think the impact of the formative feedback intervention is/are. Seven out of the ten purposively sampled students were provided with cameras to take the photographs, while the other three opted to use their own cameras. The students were allowed to use photographs from the internet on the condition that such photographs are properly referenced. The photovoice presentation was video recorded.

The photovoice presentation served as a tool to collect 'rich' qualitative data (Kuratani & Lai, 2011:2). Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) explain that in an action research, the researcher could collect several types of data using different methods. Within the context of this study it was often difficult to aptly identify the impact of formative feedback on students' essay-writing practices. Palibroda et al. explain that during a photovoice presentation, the photovoice facilitator 'gains valuable insight and understanding of important issues by having the opportunity to learn from actual lived experiences of the participants' (2009:15).

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In this study, the photovoice presentation gave the students complete control over the content of their narratives. The same colleague from Business Faculty, who facilitated the focus group interviews with the lecturers, facilitated the photovoice presentations with the students. This was done in order to ensure that students were not put under pressure by the presence of their lecturers; and also because there was a need to relate some of the issues raised in the focus group interviews with the students. (The narratives from the students' photovoice are available in Appendix **B**.)

Just as in the case of the focus group interviews for the lecturers, during the photovoice presentation, the students chose what stories to tell, how to tell the story, and what to lay emphasis on. The students were trained in February 2014 on how to use the cameras and how to construct a photovoice presentation. This project was piloted in 2013 and the key finding from the pilot study was that there is a strong need to provide technical support to the students when they embark on building their photovoice presentations. In this regard, the IT consultant in the Department of Dental Sciences provided training and technical support during the construction of the photovoice presentations.

Three major challenges were faced in using the photovoice method: time, cost and ethics constrains. Some of the participants struggled with the use of the camera, and thus needed extra time to receive support in order to understand the different functionalities of the camera. This was a key issue because the schedule for the presentation did not allow for any delays. Thus, the five students who needed extra assistance with the use of the cameras stayed behind after classes in order to receive such support.

The other important challenge, which was that of cost to rent the camera, was borne by the researcher. The cameras were rented from Sir Pius Photo Services at a discounted rate of three thousand rands. The cameras were used for a period of three weeks by the participants.

The final challenge was that posed by ethics concerns: some students' photographs revealed their identity and that of the institution. Even though the participants in this

study provided signed consent form permitting the researcher to use such information that they provided, permission has not been granted towards the use of the name of the institution. As such, some of the photographs have been edited to meet the ethics guidelines.

3.6.3. Texts and official documents

Two official documents, the students' Learner Guide and the department's rules on assignment writing and submission (see Appendix **C1**) were used as additional sources of data. These documents provided data relating to the types of policies and rules that are in place regarding essay-writing practices, and how such policies and rules are perceived, implemented, and interpreted by the lecturers and the students; as well as how all these factors impact on the essay-writing practices. For the purpose of this study, only the documents for the 2014 academic year were used.

The texts used are mainly the participating students' essay drafts that included the formative feedback provided by the lecturers (see excerpts in Appendix **D**). These essay drafts provided rich information on the formative feedback provided by the lecturers with regard to specific writing challenges that the students face. Students' essay drafts allowed the researcher to trace the impact of the formative feedback provided and to note changes in students' writing. Data from students' essay drafts were read together with the data from the photovoice presentation in order to gain deep analysis of the impact of the formative feedback intervention on the ECP and first-year students' essay-writing practices.

Table 3.3 shows the research stages and types of data collected in an action research model.

Table 3.3: Cyclical action research and concurrent data collection

Phases of action & time frame	Activities	Type of data	Tools used to collect data
Phase 1: Conceptualisation & planning (November 2013 –January 2014)	Review discussion of outgoing 1st year students' writing. Identification of writing concerns. Planning of intervention for 2014.	**Qualitative** How lecturers phrase feedback. How they plan to deal with students' essay-writing problems.	Comments on students' essays by lecturers. Focus group interviews with lecturers. 2014 Learner Guide.
Phase 2: Pre-intervention writing activity (January 2014)	Incoming 1st year & ECP students write a short personal essay during Orientation. The students later type the personal essay.	**Qualitative** Students' pre-university knowledge of essay structure, style, and grammar. Students' ability to use MS Word	Students' essay drafts. Rubrics. Lecturer's comments on students' essay drafts.
Phase 3: 1st stage intervention (February – March 2014)	Lessons on academic essay-writing. Discussion of 1st term essay topic (with students &subject lecturer). Formative feedback on students mind maps (peers). Formative feedback on 1st drafts of essays (lecturers and writing Centre). Workshop on the use of MS Word track changes. Editing and submission of 1st semester essay.	**Qualitative** How the students interpret formative feedback. How the students phrase formative feedback. How the students use track changes and rubrics to self-edit their essays.	Students' essay drafts. Comments/formative feedback by peers (audio recorded). Lecturers' comments on students' 1st semester essay assignment.
Phase 4: 2nd stage intervention (March – April 2014)	Workshop on sentence structure and paragraph development. Workshop on self & peer editing. Discussion of 2nd term essay topic. Provision of formative feedback by content lecturer and Writing centre (drafts). Self-editing with support from the Writing Centre. Submission of 2nd term essay assignment.	**Qualitative** How the students collaborate in pairs to edit peers essays. How the lecturers phrase formative feedback after dialogue with students and writing centre staff. How the students use formative feedback to improve their essays.	Students' essay drafts. Students' comments during self-editing (captured using track changes). Lecturers' comments on students' 2nd term essay assignment.
Phase 5: Evaluation and reflection (April – May 2014)	Workshop on use of portfolio of evidence. Workshop on oral presentation and photo-voice. Students do photovoice presentations on the	**Qualitative** How the students identify and express their developments in the course of writing their essays.	Students' reflections contained in their portfolio. Focused group interview of lecturers.

1st & 2nd term essays. Reflection on the intervention and planning for the second semester 2014 by lecturers and Writing Centre.	What are the lecturers' perceptions of the use of formative feedback as essay-writing intervention? How the lecturers plan to improve essay-writing practices in 2014.	Students' 2014 Learner Guide.

Table 3.3 above shows the five stages of the action research methodology used in this study. It can be represented in a cyclical action research model as seen in **Figure 3.1** below
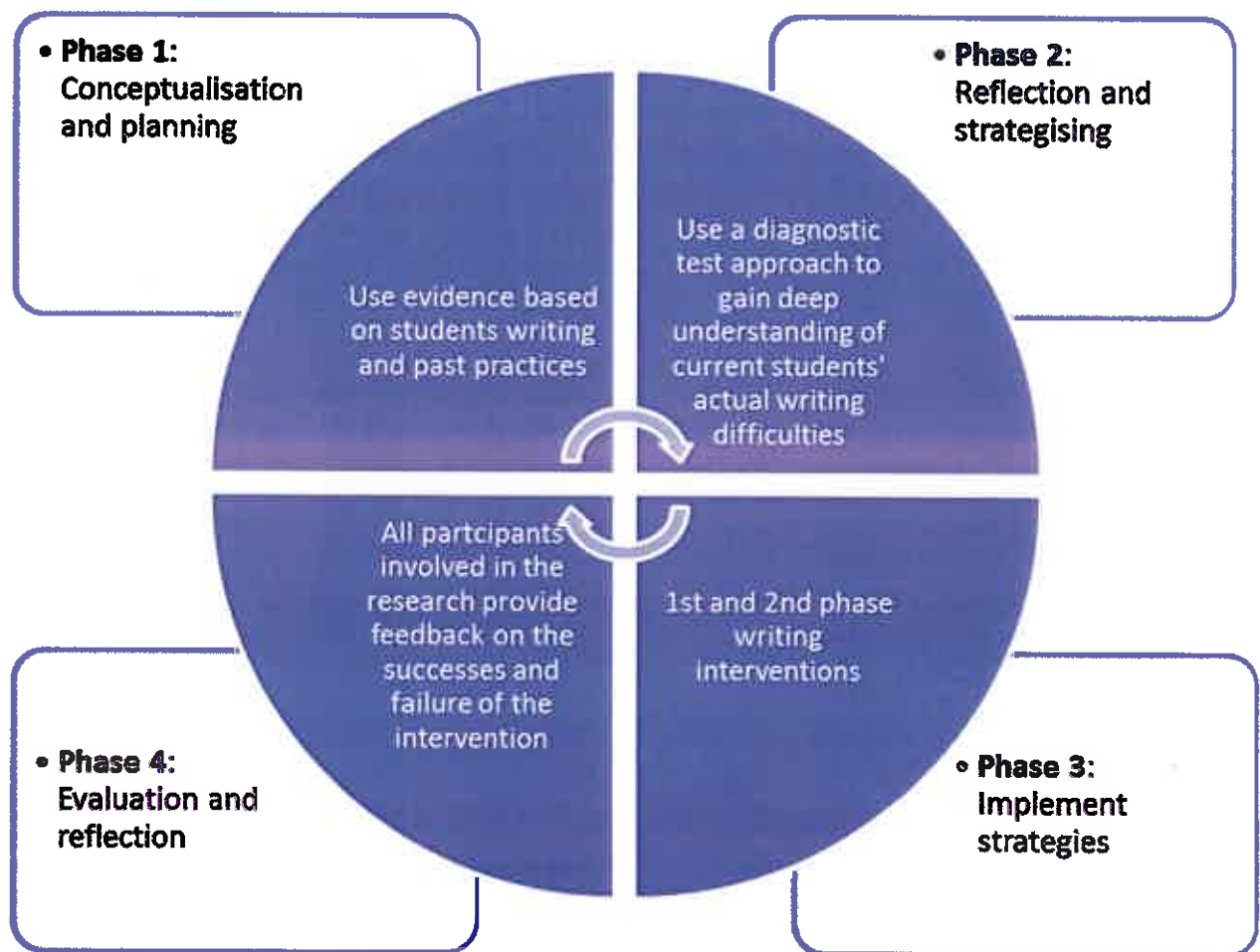
Figure 3.1: A cyclical representation of the action research model (adapted from O'Leary, 2009:140)

3.7. Transcribing focus group interviews and photovoice recording

According to Cohen et al., a researcher who transcribes interview material for research purposes should pay attention to the 'oral and the written rules' involved in these processes (2007:139). The two focus group interviews with the lecturers as well as the

photovoice presentation were transcribed for this research. The transcribing procedure involved the following steps:

- Initial transcription and vetting: after the interviews were transcribed, I listened to the audio tape and read the transcripts together with the person who conducted the interviews in order to check for inaccuracies.

- Summarising the photovoice presentations: the students' reflections during the photovoice presentations were summarised and attached to the photos that were presented. The students were later asked to vet whether the summaries represented their reflections as per their presentations. This helped to facilitate the coding of the data.

- The coding process: during the coding processes, it was necessary to refer constantly to certain parts of the audio tape and the transcripts in order to clarify ambiguities that occur (Cohen et al., 2007).

Three sources of data collection for this study have been identified and explained above. All the three sources of data were used to answer the research question as shown in Figure 3.2 below.
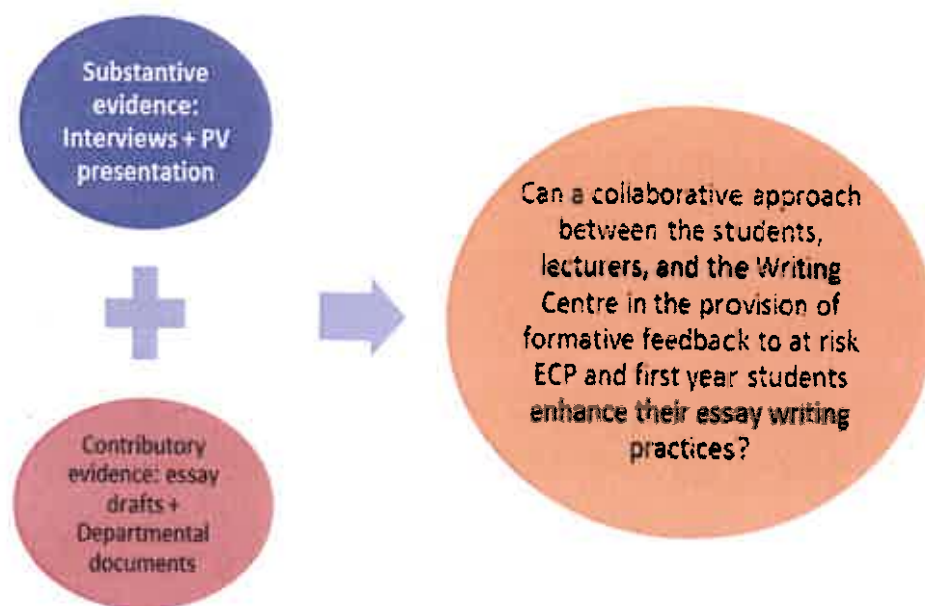
Figure 3.2: How the sources of evidence strengthen the findings

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3.8. Data analysis

When selecting a method for analysis, the researcher considers the chain of operations that the study employed. A question that regularly emerges is how to manage the analysis so that it produces relevant 'output' (Patton, 1990:48): the results that will be generated from the data and how these results would be used. All these outward links have to be taken into account when selecting the method of analysis, though the targets of the project may rate some of them as more important than others (Patton, 1990).

The desired output is a logical starting-point to consider when planning the method of analysis because the study seeks to find knowledge that is of a specific nature. When the aim is to improve the object of study, it will demand the use of careful methods of analysis to help generate the appropriate data specific to the outcome of the study (Creswell, 2003). Patton explains that the goal of analysis is to arrange collected material so that it 'answers' the initial problem of the project (1990:52). The problem thus dictates the kind of information that has to be analysed; and such types of information determine the tools that should be used to handle the information.

Similarly, Cohen et al. explain that 'qualitative data analysis involves organising, accounting for and explaining data'; that is, the ability to make meaning of the data vis-à-vis the patterns, themes, and categories expressed in the research questions (2007:461). For this research, the data collected was analysed in two phases using a typological analysis technique. Typological analysis is a data analysis technique which is 'essentially a classification process whereby data are put into groups, subsets, or categories on the basis of some clear criterion such as acts, behaviour, meanings, nature of participation, relationships, settings, or activities' (Cohen et al., 2007:473). This procedure is referred to as coding for analysis (Lautenbach, 2005; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993)

The first phase of data analysis explored the broad meanings and interpretations of the different levels of formative feedback designed and used by both the students and lecturers during essay-writing practices. Such data emerged from the formative feedback provided during essay-writing, as well as from the focus group interviews of

the participating lecturers, and the participating students' photovoice presentations. Included in this first phase of analysis was data collected from texts such as the Learner's guide and the Rules of assignment submission.

The second phase of data analysis was theory based. Using activity theory as a philosophical lens, the analysis explored the underlying relations and factors that enable or constrain the design, transmission, and use of formative feedback during essay-writing practices. Using Engeström's model of activity system as a basis, the analysis explored how different interventions affected the subjects who used the tools within their specific community while observing clear division of labour towards attaining their desired object (1999b).

Therefore, codes at this stage were derived from the six components of activity theory (subject, tool, object, rule, community, and division of labour), and were later mapped into an adapted version of Engeström's model of activity theory for detailed analysis. This process was suitable for this research because it allows for a proper examination, reporting and presentation of the different categories of data. Transcripts from the interviews with the lecturers, the photovoice presentation reviewed and relevant information were extracted as shown in Figure 3.3 below.
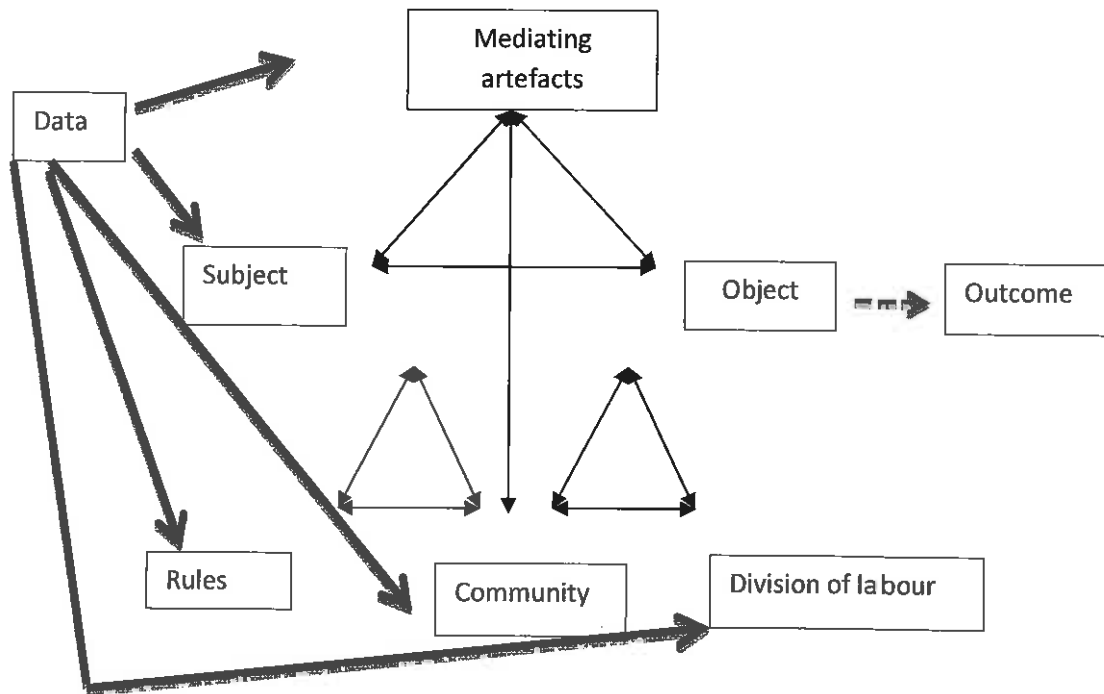
Figure 3.3: Mapping data using activity theory as an analytical tool (Lautenbach, 2005:34)

Overall, my intention was to arrive at a number of variables, clusters, themes and patterns that were connected and representative of an activity system as represented by participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2007). Based on the results from the two phases of coding, horizontal and vertical comparisons were made to facilitate analysis of data.

Boeije explains that, in order to avoid 'vagueness' in terms of subjects of comparison, a purposeful and scientific approach such as Constant Comparative Method (CCM) can be used to achieve credibility and verification (2002:392). The advantages of using CCM include desire to form categories, determine boundaries of such categories, allocate segments to categories, summarise and identify negative evidence (Tesch, 1990). Data condensed during the first phase of coding were represented in the horizontal plane. This data reflected the action research model employed in this study. The data from the second phase of coding as reflected on **Figure 3.3** above were entered into the vertical plane. This data were extracted manually using the six components of activity theory as a guide. At the end of this exercise, the researcher was

able to arrive at 'conceptual similarities,' improve the functions of the categories and identify patterns (Tesch, 1990:96). During this process, dialogue from the students during the photovoice presentation was interwoven with that from the lecturers' interviews. This created a dyad, and further enhanced the rich texture of both data and its analysis.

3.8.1. Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are essential constructs for any research to be accepted within a given discipline. Many writers have emphasised the place of validity and reliability in research in the social sciences (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 1997). For action research such as that reported here, issues of validity and reliability are prominent because of the strong 'ethical dilemmas' revealed. There is a need for clear and specific explanations about how such issues are handled (Healy & Perry, 2000:120). Lincoln and Guba pose the question: 'How can an inquirer persuade his/her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?' (1985:12).In response to the above question, Healy and Perry assert that the quality of a study in each paradigm should be justified by its own paradigm's 'terms' (2000:119). In this regard, Cohen et al. offer a number of options to understand validity in a qualitative study, including content validity, construct validity, internal and external validity, predictive, ecological, cultural, descriptive, or theoretical validity inter alia (2007). What stands out from the research of Cohen et al. is their advice that qualitative researchers should seek 'deep, rich, and complex data' in order to enhance validity (2007:135).

Triangulation, defined as 'the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour' (Cohen et al. 2007:141) was used to establish validity and reliability. Data was collected for this research by means of three key methods: focus group interviews, documents and text analysis, and photovoice presentation. These three methods provided rich, diverse, and complex data regarding the design, delivery, use and impact of formative feedback by the participants during essay-writing practices. The three methods of data collection were embedded within the

five phases of the proposed cyclical action research used in this study as evidenced in **Table 3.3** above.

Cohen et al. indicate that time triangulation makes use of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies whereby 'data is collected from the same group at different points in the time sequence' (2007:142). Cyclical action research methodology, as used in this research, signals the presence of time triangulation because data was collected from the same group of students and lecturers at different times over a five-month period while using different tools. Gummesson indicates that: 'the action researcher is involved in an organisational situation where there is not only an expectation that a contribution to knowledge should be made, but also to directly produce usable knowledge that can be applied and validated in action' (2000:35).

3.8.2. Limitation of the research

To say that this study was conducted without some challenges would not be true. Considerable challenges were encountered during the course of the research even though difficulties were finally resolved. As an Academic Literacy lecturer and Writing Consultant within the department, the researcher was conscious of his role as a participant in the action research project especially during the data collection process. Remenyi and Money explain that 'action research constitutes a potentially demanding process for the collection of data given the location of the researcher within a live situation' (2004:128). The cooperation of all participants helps the action research researcher to combine the role of a consultant and that of an academic researcher (Remenyi & Money, 2004:127).

In support of the discussion above regarding the claims of validity and reliability, this research gains support from Elliott who asserts that action research is 'not merely a form of change paradigm, but addresses fundamental issues of power and power relationships, for, in according power to participants, action research is seen as an empowering activity' (1991:54). To reduce the degree of bias and encourage validity and reliability, a combination of data collection methods was used: focus group interviews, document and text analysis, and photovoice presentations.

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Students volunteering to be part of this study might fear they could be victimised by the lecturers for reporting their learning concerns. To allay such fears, a detailed consent form was provided; its contents were read and explained to the students before they signed it (see Appendix **E1** for a copy of the consent form). The students were encouraged not to disclose their names or identity information during the photovoice project. Finally, a lecturer from the Business Faculty facilitated the two focus group interviews with the content-subject lecturers and the photovoice presentation in order to encourage participants to express themselves freely.

3.8.3. Ethics statement

Ethics in academic research has been described as the ability of researchers to balance the 'demands placed on them as professional scientists in pursuit of truth, and their subjects' rights and values potentially threatened by the research' (Cohen et al., 2007:51). Ethical issues occur typically as a result of the nature of the problem being investigated, especially by social scientists and the tools used to collect valid and reliable data (Cohen et al., 2007).

This research made use of a qualitative cyclical action research methodological framework. Due to the nature of action research in educational settings, a number of potential ethical pitfalls were identified and are explained below:

a. Protocol:

All the relevant persons, committees, and authorities were consulted; the required permission was obtained before the commencement of this project. These institutions are: the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences Research Committee, and the Head of Department of Dental Sciences.

b. Authorisation and informed consent:

During the course of this investigation, data were collected using the content lecturers' formative feedback to students' essay assignments, focus group interviews with

lecturers, as well as students' photovoice presentations. Due to the personal issues involved in these types of data, authorisation in the form of an informed consent form was signed and its contents explained to all the participants. See Appendix **E2** for copy of Ethics approval; Appendix **E3** for copy of permission from HoD: Dental Sciences; and Appendix **E1** for copies of signed consent forms.

c. Accounts and descriptions of participants' works and point of view:

All the transcripts from focus group interviews were made available to lecturers so as to allow them a second opportunity to check their recorded accounts. A post-intervention briefing was conducted with all the participants in order to discuss their points of view regarding the intervention and its impact.

d. Confidentiality and the rights to report the work:

All participants were assured of their confidentiality during the process of this research: a clause on confidentiality is included in the informed consent form. The dissemination of the research report was explained in the informed consent form. Of major importance is the right of the researcher to publish the results of the research as a study or in journal articles without jeopardising participants' rights to privacy or confidentiality (see Appendix **E1**).

3.9. Conclusion

This chapter focused on the methodology used in this study. It discussed in detail the qualitative cyclical action research paradigm and the methods used to collect data: focus group interviews, documents and texts analysis, and photovoice presentations. In this chapter, there was a description of the research population and research participants; and how triangulation was used to enhance validity and reliability. Finally, some of the challenges and limitations that were faced in the course of this research were highlighted. A discussion of the findings is presented in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four:

Research findings

4.1. Introduction

The primary goal of this chapter is to report on the results of this research in relation to the main research question:

How can a collaborative approach between the student, lecturer, and the Writing Centre in the provision of formative feedback to at-risk ECP and first-year students enhance their essay-writing practices?

Paying attention to the prominence of activity theory in the literature review presented in Chapter Two, this chapter presents the findings of this research within an activity theory framework. The chapter is therefore organised as follows:

- First, a brief explanation of the use of action research as a methodological framework is presented.
- Second, the use of activity theory as a philosophical lens is presented.
- Third, the findings are presented in terms of each of the following components of activity theory, viz:
  - Subject: the ECP and first-year students.
  - Community: lecturers, Writing Centre staff, peers of the subject, the classroom.
  - Rules: implicit and explicit guidelines in the completion of essay assignments in particular and academic interaction in general.
  - Division of labour: lecturers, students, support staff in the Writing Centre, tutors.
  - Tools: use of formative feedback and formative feedback strategies, use of electronic learning resources such as Google docs and MS Word Track changes.
  - Object: enhance knowledge of essay-writing and improved appreciation of academic writing.
- Fourth, the above findings are plotted onto the activity theory model. This creates a space for a juxtaposition of the activity theory components. The final Chapter discusses the relation between the components within the activity and suggests how these have

influenced the at-risk first-year and ECP students' understanding of essay-writing and appreciation of the use of formative feedback.

For the purpose of this research, the activity was determined to be at-risk ECP and first-year students' interactions with formative feedback during essay-writing assignments. In this regard, I have applied Engeström's (1999) model of activity system as seen in Figure 4.1 below. This system incorporates four distinct sub-triangles (otherwise known as sub-systems) into a holistic activity system. The top part of the triangle in Figure 4.1 (tools, subjects, and object) was used to interrogate how ECP and first-year students used the available tools at their disposal to mediate the challenges they faced during essay-writing practices, and how this contributed to their understanding of academic writing within a university setting.

The bottom left of the triangle, subject, rules, and community, was used to examine how the ECP and first-year students, serving as subjects, engaged with the explicit and implicit rules of essay-writing in particular, and academic writing in general within the expectations of the community. In this regard, I question whether the students fully made use of community resources during essay-writing practices; and determine how some members of the community set the rules that govern all students and lecturers during essay-writing.

In the bottom right corner of the triangle, object, community and division of labour, I examine how the community sets the roles to be undertaken by its members in the form of division of labour, to achieve the object: enhancing essay-writing practices for the subjects. I emphasize the absence of the subject in this sub-system and the implications of this absence.

In the final central sub-triangle, subject, community, and object, I interrogate how the ECP and first-year students sometimes ignore the rules, tools, and roles in the division of labour, by consulting only with certain members of the community in order to reach their object of enhancing essay-writing practices. I demonstrate how this practice potentially impacts on students' appreciation of explicit and implicit rules, and how to use available tools as well as possible during essay writing.
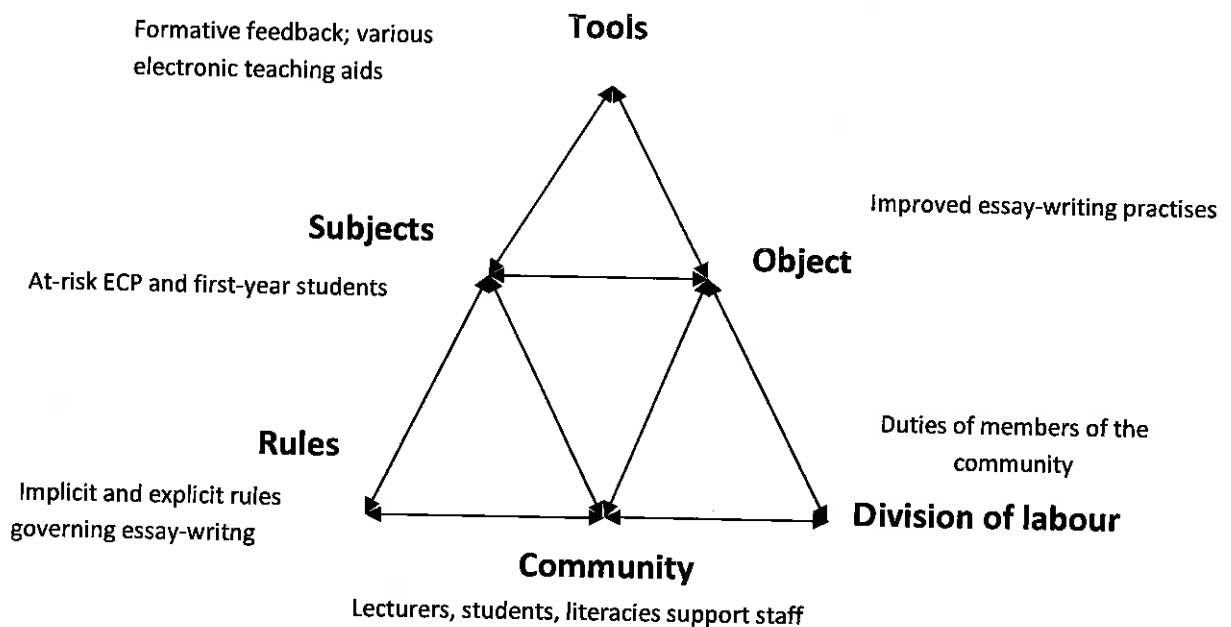
Fig 4.1: Overview of the activity system

Formative feedback; various electronic teaching aids

Tools

Subjects

At-risk ECP and first-year students

Object

Improved essay-writing practises

Rules

Implicit and explicit rules governing essay-writng

Community

Lecturers, students, literacies support staff

Duties of members of the community

Division of labour

Activity theory provides a useful lens to examine the ECP and first-year students' interactions with formative feedback holistically. It enabled me to identify and interrogate specific sub-activity systems and pay attention to nuances that they provide. Above all, activity theory enabled me to explore relations between different components of the activity theory system and how they relate to the research questions.

4.2. A brief explanation of the action research methodological framework

In Chapter Three, I located action research as part of the social constructivism approach in qualitative studies in which people create 'subjective meanings of their experiences' and direct them towards specific objects or things (Cresswell, 1997:8). I indicated that such meanings are manifested and realised socially and historically (Makoelle, 2012a); as such, action research falls clearly within the 'participatory advocacy' worldview (Newman, 2003:32; Cresswell, 1997:9). In this study, an intervention was initiated in which there was a clear goal to use formative feedback in order to enhance essay-writing skills of ECP and first-year students who were at risk of failing their theory subjects. Table 3.3 captures the phases of activities in the cyclical action research strategy. According to Remenyi and Money, in action research the researcher proposes an intervention towards a pre-determined goal with the aid and

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active participation of members who are stake-holders in the organisations (2004). Data was collected over a period of five months (between January and May 2014) using tools such as focus group interviews, official documents, students' essay drafts, and photovoice presentations as represented in Figure 3.2 and on Table 3.2. As seen from those illustrations, a cyclical action research methodological approach lends strong support to, and complements, the use of activity theory in analysing the findings. It provided the space to collect rich data over a certain period of time that reflected the lived experiences of participants.

4.3. Activity theory perspectives on essay-writing intervention

In this section, I present the findings pertaining to each of the six components of an activity system.

4.3.1. Subject: at-risk ECP and first-year students

Engeström defines the subject in activity theory as an individual or a group of people who are undertaking a particular activity (1999b). In this study, the subject of the activity was the ECP and first-year students who were engaged in an academic essay-writing intervention. The ECP and first-year students who participated in this study are those who have been identified as at risk of failing essay assignments. Table 4.1 presents background information about the students selected in the study. Some of the information in Table 4.1 is demographic; while the excerpts from the students' reflective essays capture their perceptions of academic writing in the first month of their stay as students in a university.

Table 4.1: Participants demographics and excerpts of their reflections

Student	First-year route		First language	Residence	Excerpts from reflective essay/photovoice presentation
	ECP	Mainstream			
Divine		√	Afrikaans	Bellville South	I really don't mind being taught in English. I watch a lot of movies in English and it is not a problem. I also speak to a lot of people outside in English even though at home we use Afrikaans. When I was working, we used mostly English at work; so I am sorted. But, I have been struggling to get my essays

						right. I'm now repeating this theory subject because I failed my two essays last year.
Beryl		√		English	Kuils River	In school, when we gave our teachers our essay, they fix up our problems and errors and gave it back to us to go and write it up in a clear paper. Then we submitted the clean one, we always passed. But here, they tell you to go check and go research and go find out yourself. Why can't they just fix it up? Why must we do all these essays when our profession is in the lab? I didn't sign up for this!
Gail		√		English	Paarl	After obtaining my Matric results, I went to Europe for two years and lived with my aunt who worked in a dental laboratory. I developed interest in her work and the materials and machines that they used. I visited their laboratory, and it was fantastic. So, I came back to SA and worked for 1 year to raise money to contribute to my study here. It is cheaper to study Dental Technology at home compared to UK; so I am here now.
Ande		√		Afrikaans	Mitchelsplain	At first, I was worried that I might not be able to cope with the use of English in a university because Afrikaans is my first language. But since we came here, and we heard all the lecturers speak, I felt ok because they all speak English in a way that I can relate to and understand. However, I have had serious difficulties in understanding some of the technical words that they used. That has been my main problem, especially if we have to write those 10-page essays. It just sucks.
Venter		√		Afrikaans	Strand	I originally applied to study engineering, but when I was not accepted there my dad asked me to try out Dental Technology so long. I love the work in the lab and how to create things; but I struggle with the theory part of it. We are constantly using the wrong words and the wrong approach and the wrong references. It is just too much stress to write these essays because that is not how we did it in high school.
Laiba	√			English	Mitchelsplain	In school, when we write our essay, it was like about what we felt. Once we gave it to the teacher, all we wanted back was whether we passed or fail. There was no more issue to discuss.
A'isha	√			Afrikaans	Delft	When we were in Grade 9, we visited CPUT during the Career Fair Day and I was immediately attracted by the way the students in dentistry did their things. I have always enjoyed working with my hands, and making things. So, I wanted to join the CPUT and be able to make the false teeth for people and make them smile beautiful
Siphokasi	√			isiXhosa	University	Even though English is my second language, I am very comfortable learning

					Residence	with it. I got a high grade in my matric English; and I read a lot of novels. So I can read and listen to English easily; it is not a school problem for me. I am ok with my writings, even though I had to go to the Writing Centre a lot to get it there.
Thabo	√			isiXhosa	University Residence	My mother was an English teacher at school. She taught us English from when we were very young. All of us in our home speak English and isisXhosa very well. So I passed it well also at school. I just didn't know that I will be writing so many essays too. I thought that we will be working only in the lab; cos that is where we are all the time.

From Table 4.1 above, several important observations can be made. From the ages of the students, we can deduce that they have taken different academic routes to reach their current course of study. Two of the students, Gail and Ande, indicated that they took some gap years, 4 and 3 respectively, after obtaining their senior certificates because they wanted to earn some money. Divine and Venter previously registered in other disciples before making a switch to Dental Sciences. Beryl, Laiba, and Siphokasi each spent one year at home after obtaining their Senior Certificate, before registering to study Dental Technology. From the sample registered to study Dental Technology, only Thabo and Aisha registered immediately after completing their Senior Certificates. This means that students have had different degrees of planning and preparation before registering to study Dental Technology. This prior preparation and planning contributes to students' motivation to succeed in the discipline as explained by Gail and A'isha respectively:

> After obtaining my Matric results, I went to Europe for two years and lived with my aunt who worked in a dental laboratory. I developed an interest in her work and the materials and machines that they used. I visited their laboratory, and it was fantastic. So, I came back to SA and worked for 1 year to raise money to contribute to my study here. It is cheaper to study Dental Technology at home compared to UK; so I am here now (Gail, 2014).

A'isha made the following observations:

> When we were in Grade 9, we visited CPUT during the Career Fair Day and I was immediately attracted by the way the students in dentistry did their things. I have always

> enjoyed working with my hands, and making things. So, I wanted to join the CPUT and be able to make the false teeth for people and make them smile beautiful (A'isha, 2014).

Another important observation from the Table above is the students' use of English. It was noted that only two students from the sample used English as a home language. The issue of using English as a language of instruction in the Department and the University is an important one. In the beginning, I assumed that the use of English as a medium of instruction would pose a disadvantage to students who did not use English as a home language. From the students' point of view, it is not so. Many of the students stated that the use of English to teach was not an obstacle to their learning:

> I really don't mind being taught in English. I watch a lot of movies in English and it is not a problem. I also speak to a lot of people outside in English even though at home we use Afrikaans. When I was working, we used mostly English at work; so I am sorted (Divine, 2014).

The two isiXhosa speakers had this to say:

> Even though English is my second language, I am very comfortable learning with it. I got a high grade in my matric English; and I read a lot of novels. So I can read and listen to English easily; it is not a school problem for me (Siphokasi, 2014).

The other isiXhosa speaker – Thabo – had this to say:

> My mother was an English teacher at school. She taught us English from when we were very young. All of us in our home speak English and isiXhosa very well. So I passed it well also at school (Thabo, 2014).

One of the Afrikaans-speaking students made this remark regarding the use of English:

> At first, I was worried that I might not be able to cope with the use of English in a university because Afrikaans is my first language. But since we came here, and we heard all the lecturers speak, I felt ok because they all speak English in a way that I can relate to and understand. However, I have had serious difficulties in understanding some of the technical words that they used. That has been my main problem (Ande, 2014).

This reaction by Ande was echoed by two other students. It showed that the students are actively evaluating their linguistic competencies, and that some of them have clearly identified where their difficulties may lie with regards to the use of English as a teaching medium. Despite this positive outlook towards the use of English in the Department, it seems that the students still do not find essay-writing interesting. Column six on Table 4.1 reveals vividly this despair towards essay-writing. Comments and remarks from the students as captured in column six demonstrate the following:

- That the students did not expect to be writing academic essays at the university (cf. Beryl and Thabo);
- That they choose to study dental science partly because they do not like disciplines that required a lot of reading and writing (see Divine and Laiba).
- That they do not see the value in being forced to write lengthy academic essays in dental theory because their profession is based on laboratory work, not written work (see Ande, Venter and Gail).

The students' perception of formative feedback was as varied as it was interesting. Some of the students indicated that they had never received formative feedback on their school essays before. Laiba said:

> In school, when we write our essay, it was like about what we felt. Once we gave it to the teacher, all we wanted back was whether we passed or fail. There was no more issue to discuss (Laiba, 2014).

Another student had a different perception:

> When we gave our teachers our essay, they fix up our problems and errors and gave it back to us to go and write it up in a clear paper. Then we submitted the clean one, we always passed when we did that (Beryl, 2014).

The above excerpts present a summary of the subjects' background vis-à-vis the use of formative feedback during essay-writing practices. The excerpts raise issues such as diversity in their demographics; different expectations of writing at a university; gap years in which the student did not engage in any serious academic writing exercises; and pessimism towards academic writing; that should constitute valuable considerations

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for analysis of how the at-risk students used the mediated tools during essay-writing activities. The rest of the discussion in the findings is premised on the subject's profile.

4.3.2. The Tools: formative feedback, various electronic teaching aids

Engeström's (1999b) notion of tools in an activity system encompasses the material, mental, and physical instruments used in an activity to transform the object. Formative feedback is examined in this study as the main mediating artefact used to transform at-risk ECP and first-year students' essay-writing practices. Formative feedback was provided orally, in writing, and through the use of electronic devices such as the computer. Incidents and episodes in which at-risk ECP and first-year students as well as their lecturers interacted with this tool are used as examples, to demonstrate how mediating artefacts have affected the writing practices of the students. Pre-intervention and post-intervention focus group interviews with the lecturers, as well as the written formative feedback that they provided on the students' essay drafts provided the mediating tools during essay-writing activities. Furthermore, the ECP and first-year students' reflective essays, as well as their photovoice presentations provided valuable insights regarding their perceptions of formative feedback as mediating tools; intended to transform their essays in particular, as well as their academic writing skills in general.

4.3.2.1. Modes of transmission of formative feedback used during essay-writing.

From the lecturers' point of view, two main modes of transmission of formative feedback are used: oral and written. Lecturers predominantly use the written mode of transmission of formative feedback, which they provide on the students' assignment drafts, so that the students can revise and edit their essays with the help of the feedback at their own pace. Below are excerpts from the lecturers on their use of written formative feedback:

Ms Benedict remarked:

> I normally get them to submit to me their drafts either by email or printed. Then I read through them and make comments about things that I feel they should change. Then send

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the drafts back to them and give them time to use in the computer lab to fix their essay (Benedict, 2014).

Ms Jane on the other hand explained:

> I used to ask them to submit the written drafts to me where I will write down my comments. But I realised that it was not a very good way to do it because some students did not have money to print many drafts, and it was a waste of paper and things like that. Then, I started collaborating with the writing centre to use track changes to make comments on the students' drafts; but many of the students didn't really like the track change style. So now, we are using Google Docs to make comments. It saves time, paper, and it is more user-friendly to the students than track changes (Jane, 2014).

The above excerpts demonstrate that lecturers are conscious of the importance of formative feedback as a mediating artefact; thus their desire to put their formative feedback in writing. It shows that they are conscious of the various platforms on which they can capture their written formative feedback such as in electronic and hard copies. Some of the lecturers demonstrated a conscious attempt to make their formative feedback available in a way that is convenient and accessible to students. This was reflected in Ms Jane's remark that they decided to use Google Docs because some students were not comfortable with MS Word Track changes.

In instances where the oral mode of transmission of formative feedback is provided by the lecturer, the oral feedback is usually used to complement the written versions. Lecturers explained their use of oral formative feedback as follows:

> I used to allow my students to come to my office at their convenience so that we can discuss their assignment However, I found that only few of them came, and that did not change anything in their final submission. Now, I decided that they must have a written draft first, before I can talk with them (Mr Paul, 2014).

Ms Jane highlighted the difficulties that lecturers sometimes face when they want to have a one-on-one discussion with the students:

> I mostly write down on their essay that they must come to see me so that I can explain certain aspects of their essay that I think they might not have understood. They mostly do

not come. Many of them just refuse to come see me. It is very strange. Even the Writing Centre people who are not supposed to be experts in this field sometimes write on the students' essays and say go check with your lecturer about this. But they don't (Jane, 2014).

Ms Benedict explained that:

> I sit with the ECP groups in the computer lab and myself and the Writing consultant, we give the students feedback on their essays and we check that they are at least trying to implement the suggestions we make. It is good because then, the students can ask us questions directly, and we can respond to them about the issues that they are facing (Benedict, 2014).

The above quotations demonstrate that lecturers, as members of the community predominantly use the written mode of transmission of formative feedback. They regularly employ the oral mode of transmission of formative feedback because they want to complement the written form. The excerpts above highlight some of the challenges faced by the community when they try to convey formative feedback to the subjects. This relation is sometimes tense between members of the community and the subjects, when they engage in the exchange of formative feedback. It will be discussed again when I examine the students' perceptions of the formative feedback provided as tools, as well as the rules and division of labour.

4.3.2.2. Types of formative feedback used

Evidence from the focus group interviews with lecturers, the photovoice presentations by students, and students' draft essays point to four key types of formative feedback being used: synchronous, asynchronous, internal, and external formative feedback. These will be examined in detail below:

a) Synchronous formative feedback:

Synchronous formative feedback was defined in the literature review as a type of formative feedback in which the learner and the teacher benefit mutually from 'moments of contingency' during the learning process (Black & William, 2009:10). Dialogue and spontaneity, according to Brophy (2004) and Black and William (2009) are relevant tenets of synchronous formative feedback. The following excerpts illustrate how

synchronous formative feedback has been used to support the ECP and first-year students during essay-writing practices:

During the post-intervention focus group interviews one of the lecturers had this to say:

> One of the problems that we have with our students is that they think because they are handing in the drafts, I am going to correct their mistakes for them. Whereas, I am reading to see if you have covered the entire topic required from the question that I have given you. I am not reading it in order to correct your spelling and grammar mistakes. I don't see that as a purpose of reading a draft and you can tell me if I am wrong (Ms Jane, 2014).

A different view was expressed by one of the lecturers thus:

> I work with the students inside the computer lab. I don't wait for them to bring their drafts to my office, or to take them to the Writing Centre. I allocate time and book the computer lab, and take all my ECP students in there. Then I read their drafts from their computers, and together with the Writing Centre staff, we make corrections and the students fix up their assignments on the spot. If it is something or problem for language, then the Writing Centre facilitator assist the students. If it is a problem for content understanding, then I assist the student. If it is a problem of information literacy, then we get the book online, or get it from the library which is next door. So, by the time our session is over, the students will be saving a draft that is already much better than if I was to leave them to do it at their own time. Even when the students come in with nothing written, I ask them to start writing their drafts there on the spot, so that their time is not wasted (Ms Benedict, 2014).

b) Asynchronous formative feedback:

Asynchronous formative feedback occurs when there is some time gap between the time that the lecturer, or a more knowledgeable other, identifies a problem in a student's essay draft and when such an issue is communicated to the student (Clark, 2012). Asynchronous formative feedback occurs when the lecturer uses data from the students' past learning activities as a form of 'historical analysis'; or when the lecturer waits until the end of the learning activity before giving formative feedback (Clark, 2012:213). In this study, asynchronous formative feedback was noticeable from the inception of the study. Decisions to use an action research methodological frame in which there was a pre-intervention writing exercise and an analysis of that writing exercise before an intervention enabled the use of asynchronous formative feedback.

An example of asynchronous formative feedback was evident when lecturers, during the two focus group interviews, consistently made references to the students' past learning experiences. For example, Ms Benedict had this to say:

> I am not a language person at all, but these students come here with a lot of issues that they struggle with in terms of language. They struggle with basic, very basic language terms, basic grammar, and things like that. When it comes to assignment writing, they cannot construct an assignment. They have absolutely no idea on constructing an assignment, or even where to start. This means that they were not prepared for this place. That is why I try to work with them one-on-one in a computer lab with the help of the Writing Centre staff (Ms Benedict, 2014).

Another lecturer (Mr Paul) supports Ms Benedict's views when he stated:

> I think that any meaningful intervention must start right at the very beginning, in the secondary schools. We now have a Writing Centre here, where the Writing facilitators try to support the kids. But those of them coming from very poor backgrounds with disadvantaged schooling need a lot more help. Therefore, somebody needs to start preaching that our children need more than Maths and Science literacy intervention in primary and high schools, they also badly need academic literacy intervention because many of them cannot read and write at the required level before they arrive at the university (Paul, 2014).

From the two quotations above, evidence of asynchronous formative feedback is seen. Ms Benedict evidently based her formative support during essay-writing practices on students' past learning experiences and what 'they bring' to the university in terms of writing competencies. Mr Paul supported this view and even went on to suggest that the Writing Centre model should be established in secondary and high schools to support and better prepare learners before they are admitted to universities.

Some of the students failed to respond to or understood the place of asynchronous formative feedback as is evident from this remark by a student during the photovoice presentation:

> I just felt that with my first draft, I didn't get enough feedback. For example, they commented about how I was writing my introduction and how I was writing the paragraphs and my in-text

references. Then, in my second draft, they marked wrong my references list even though it was never marked in my first draft. What is really funny is that I included this same reference list in my first draft (Beryl, 2014).

The student's comment above typifies the difficulties that some students face when they have to deal with asynchronous formative feedback. This confusion is significant and worrying because lecturers adopted different models such as tutorials/Google docs to provide formative feedback during essay-writing practices. Some lecturers prefer to scaffold the formative feedback provided. The student's prior school experience was evident here. She assumed that her essay 'will be fixed' the moment the lecturer read it. Therefore, she did not appreciate the value of follow-up sessions in terms of her essay development. This view contributes to discussion on internal formative feedback. It fuels discussion around writing development as a skills approach or a process approach. In this regard, the question is whether formative feedback should be skills-oriented or process-oriented.

c) Internal and external formative feedback

Internal formative feedback was defined as formative feedback that is generated internally by the student either solely by his/herself, or as a result of certain perceived external cues provided by a MKO (Clark, 2012). External formative feedback is any feedback that is provided by some other person or resource acting as a MKO (Price et al., 2010). Clark asserts, the generation of internal formative feedback is reliant on the students' ability to engage in and regulate learning (2012). In the comments below, a number of the students indicated how they struggle to make meaning of the formative feedback that they received:

> I feel that the comments don't always help me because sometimes they just say *I should refer back to my books or notes*[9], without saying what exactly is wrong with what I wrote. Then sometimes also, the lecturer just puts a question mark there or draws a line and say

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[9] The phrase in italics represents my emphasis which is further explained in the chapter.

check. I get to understand what the problem is and I fix it; but sometimes, I don't and then I go back to the lecturer (Laiba, 2014).

Another student responded to the use of internal and external formative feedback thus:

> For me, I thought that the feedback was good. I think that they mostly wanted to challenge us to work with our heads. In the first draft for example, I had 7 pages and they wrote a lot of feedback in the first 3 pages, then very little feedback on the other pages. So I took it upon myself to correct the errors in the other pages based on the comments I got in the earlier pages. When I submitted the second draft, the lecturer commented and praised me for fixing up the rest of the essay before pointing out new errors (Ande, 2014).

The two comments above indicate that students responded differently to the process of internalising external formative feedback. Some of the students questioned the feedback that lecturers provided and reflected on them at different levels of intensity. This aspect foregrounds a discussion on the draft-revising-redraft approach to essay-writing seen under discussion on Rules.

4.3.2.3.   Perceptions of formative feedback strategies

The aim of implementing a collaborative approach towards the provision of formative feedback to first-year and ECP students during essay-writing practices was twofold. First, the collaborative intervention was designed to contribute towards improving the students' ability to identify and reflect on different types of formative feedback that they received during essay-writing practices. Second, the collaborative approach explored avenues through which content-subject lecturers can actively provide formative feedback to the students during essay-writing practices. This section reports on how different types of formative feedback are used by the students who act as subjects, and lecturers who form part of the community.

Table 4.2: students identify modes of transmission of types of formative feedback

Type of formative feedback	Divine	Beryl	Venter	Ande	Gail	Laiba	A'isha	Siphokasi	Thabo

Oral Synchronous			√		√	√	√	√	
Written synchronous (non-electronic)	√	√	√	√	√		√	√	√
Written synchronous (using Google Docs)		√	√		√	√	√	√	√
Written synchronous (using MS Word track changes)			√			√			√
Asynchronous (oral)				√	√		√	√	
Asynchronous (electronic)		√	√		√	√		√	√
Asynchronous (non-electronic)	√			√			√	√	√

Table 4.2 depicts various types of formative feedback provided and modes of transmission as depicted by students. A crucial finding from the Table and during the photovoice presentation is that some of the formative feedback strategies used by the lecturers are not recognised as such by the students. Analysis of the lecturers' remarks during the two focus group interview highlights this issue and raises a concern regarding how lecturers view students. For example, Devine, Beryl, and Ande identified three or fewer formative feedback strategies during the photovoice presentation.

Divine said that:

> When I first got my essay instructions, I felt lost. It was difficult. Then I wrote my first draft, my introductions and part of my body, and I gave it to the lecturer. He made some comments

and gave it back to me, and it was better. I could then finish up the draft and sent again to the lecturer (Devine, 2014).

This remark and the information from Table 4.2 indicate that Devine and Beryl are not using any type of orally transmitted formative feedback.

From the Table, it is clear that synchronous paper-based formative feedback and its electronic counterpart are popular with students. All the students in the sample used one or both of these routes in order to obtain formative feedback from the lecturers. Google Docs however was favoured as opposed to MS Work track changes: as confirmed in this quotation from one of the lecturers:

> The students are more comfortable using Google Docs instead of Track changes. So, this year, I am working with Writing Centre in order to give the students comments on their essay using Google Docs even though it is not as intensive in terms of its usability compared to Track changes. Maybe we could use Track changes again when the students are in year 2 (Jane, 2014).

One of the students explained that:

> I love Google Docs. I tried using Track changes, but it was just too much for me. At least, with Google Docs everything seems very clear and organised. I can see the lecturer's comments by the side and I can decide when and how to use it (Gail, 2014).

From the above, it is clear that students generally expected some kind of feedback from lecturers on their essay drafts. It is evident that they prefer such feedback to be recorded in writing, either on paper or electronic. However, the interpretation and use of such feedback differs from student to student. For example, one of the lecturers remarked that:

> I get their essays and take time out to read and comment. I even direct them to go visit the Writing Centre and I identify sections that need language help but you can imagine that the students ignore these comments and repeat the same errors, or just delete some of those sections (Mr Paul, 2014).

In addition to the inclination towards written formative feedback, many students expressed concern at the quality of some of the formative feedback they received from lecturers. One of the students noted that:

> The lecturers read my first draft and did not comment on my reference list. Then in my second draft, he said my reference list was wrong. Why didn't he check it in my first draft? (Beryl, 2014).

Another student expressed concern that the formative feedback they received was not always detailed or worthwhile to them. She said:

> Sometimes, the lecturer just writes "No", "Check", "Spelling", or "poor reference", without saying what exactly I must do with them. Then, they sometimes just ask us to go back and read our notes; which is a lot of reading to do so that you can fix one sentence in the essay. Why can't they just show you the right way of doing it? (Laiba, 2014).

Lecturers responded to this claim by stating that they phrase the feedback like that for several reasons, as seen below:

> These students are very weak and sometimes very careless with their academic work. I ask them in the assignment instructions that they should go to the Writing Centre for help on things like grammar, spelling, basic stuff like that. The people at the Writing Centre together with those at the library provide academic literacy and info literacy stuff. But the students don't go to these people; or when they do, they go there just when the assignment is due so that they can get a signature in order to submit (Mr Paul, 2014).

Another lecturer explained that:

> I scaffold my comments and I expect the students to see this and follow up on them. Things that are very basic like spelling etc, I just underline and write "check" on the students' assignment. I focus more on the critical aspects of the essay and that is where I make more comments because I know that the students' ability to write critically needs more attention than such obvious stuff (Ms Jane, 2014).

Divergent perceptions about use of formative feedback between students, as subjects of this study, and lecturers, as members of the community, are of some significance. Evidence might suggest that there is a lack of structure in the approach use to provide

formative feedback, as well as the content of the feedback that the lecturers provide, and how it should be interpreted by students. The other significant implication of such shortcomings could be that lecturers and students have completely different notions or definitions of formative feedback and what academic literacy support entails.

4.3.3. Rules

Rules in an activity system play the important role of defining how subjects should interact within the community when they make use of the tools (Hardman, 2005). Engeström (2008) indicates that the rules are explicit and implicit directives that control the way the subjects act or interact within the activity system. This section of the study explains the at-risk ECP and first-year students' knowledge and understanding of the rules, with some emphasis on how lecturers contribute to enforcing these rules.

4.3.3.1. Explicit rules

The documents that the lecturers disseminated to students as guidance for completing essay assignments demonstrated that lecturers in particular and the Department of Dental Science as a whole, have taken measures to make the rules of assignment-writing explicit. Figure 4.2 below is an example of one such document that encapsulates the explicit rules which guide the students in the department during essay-writing.
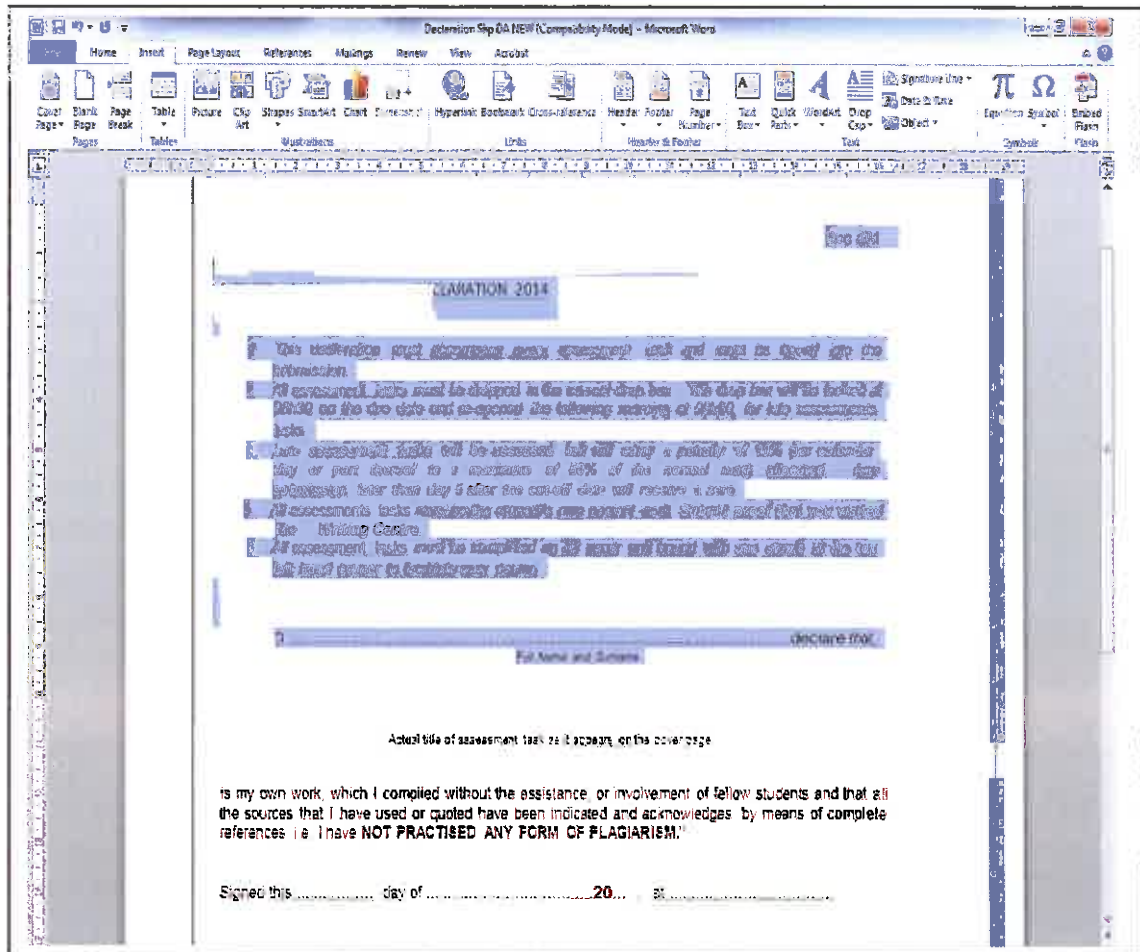
Figure 4.2: Department's rules on assignment writing

A careful reading of the document captured in Figure 4.2 above revealed that the department provided students with a list of instructions which students need to observe in the process of completing their essay assignment. On the one hand, instructions should guide students in the process of completing the essay assignment. Directives on issues such as formatting of the assignment, and where to seek help when in need of academic literacy or information literacy support are provided. On the other hand, the checklist is designed to remind students of what they should have done before they submitted the assignment.

The above provisions seem sufficient on the surface in providing guidelines and suggestions for the students. Evidence collected from students during photovoice presentation indicated that there is a need to review these guidelines as they currently

exist. During the photovoice presentations, many of the students queried the clarity of rules and regulations that were provided during essay-writing as seen below:

> If you have watched the movie Friday you will realise that Craig and Smokies are going down. That is how I felt when I saw the instructions on the essay. This is because, so many times I got confused about what the instruction wanted from me (Divine, 2014).

Another student's reaction to the instructions was captured as follows:

> At first, when I started with the essay I wasn't quite sure of what they wanted. The instructions were unclear to me (Venter, 2014).

The above quotations testify to the challenges that many first-year students face when trying to understand the contents of the instructions. One possible reason for this situation might be that the instructions do not contain sufficient details to make their requirements explicit to students. Divergence of perceptions exists on formative feedback and academic literacy knowledge between the lecturers and the students. This difference of perception might explain the difficulty that the students face when trying to interpret the instructions. This contributes to the students' perception of their identity and the lack of power that they represent within the academe.

4.3.3.2.   Implicit rules

The explicit rules were made available to, and enforced by, lecturers. The rules served to mediate the relation between students and lecturers: they were mostly constructed by the lecturers. This made it more difficult for students to grasp fully some of the implicit rules. The excerpt below points to how the explicit and implicit rules were perceived as the same by the lecturer:

> I expect them to attend my lectures and to attend the workshops that are organised in conjunction with the Writing Centre. I also expect them to bring along drafts of their essay during the workshop. Those who don't come with their drafts are sent back home and marked absent. I expect them to contribute during the workshops, and to express themselves in a manner that I can understand. As the year progresses, I expect them to be able to express themselves in a proper academic manner (Ms Jane, 2014).

The above quotation from one of the lecturers typifies how the explicit and the implicit rules are sometimes conflated thus leading to difficulties in the way students understand and interpret them. For example, the lecturer (Ms Jane) identified some explicit rules such as attendance, and submission of drafts assignments on due dates. Then she speaks of the students' ability to express themselves in an 'academic manner' without indicating what this exactly entails.

Student's full name and surname		Student number	Student's signature	
		Allotted mark - %	Mark obtained - %
Relevant information			
Inclusion of the most recent and / or less common information			
Evidence of reflection / Conclusion			
Layout, presentation			
Language proficiency			
Referencing			
Information literacy			
TOTAL	100		
Assessor and/or Moderators - Signature			

Figure 4.3: Department's rubric on assignment writing

This conflation of explicit and implicit rules can be seen from the perspective of the standard departmental rubric captured in the document on Figure 4.3. It states that marks will be awarded for content, language, format/organisation, referencing, introduction and conclusion. It does not state the marks that will be allocated for those sections; neither does it state what are required in those sections. This ambiguity in the rubric transforms the rules that are meant to be explicit by the lecturer, but seen as implicit by the student. The student who is not able to generate adequate internal formative feedback struggles to make sense of these rules and might therefore not provide the required quality of essay. This confusion was expressed by one of the students during the photovoice presentations in the picture below on Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4: Image from a student's photovoice presentation (Siphokasi, 2014)

Figure 4.3 above was used by Siphokasi during the photovoice presentation. She reflected on the frustrations that she felt during the initial stages of the essay-writing assignments. One of her gravest concerns was her inability to decipher exactly what was required of her from the rubric of the assignment.

During the collaborative essay-writing intervention that was implanted, it was necessary that students provided formative feedback on their peers' essay drafts. This required that a more explicit rubric be designed. The Writing Centre collaborated with two of the subject lecturers in designing the rubric from which the following excerpts were captured on Figure 4.5 below:

Rubric: Marked by Percentage range

Criteria	Novice	Competent	Proficient
Introduction (10%)	No or poor summary of essential message / key points of assignment. Lack of logical development of key point. Does not captivate the readers' interest. Does not present a background to the topic.	An attempt to summarise essential message / key points of assignment. A logical breakdown of the essay. There is an attempt to captivate the reader's attention through the use of some background information.	Summary of essential message / key points of assignment presented. Logical breakdown and presentation of key points of assignment in a summary format. Excellent attempt to captivate the reader's attention through the use of some background information.
Main Discussion (40%)	Poor understanding of the topic. Processes in the fabrication of dentures. Weak analysis of the protocol during the fabrication of the dentures and insufficient identification and explanation of the skills needed to complete those processes. Illogical structuring and linking of discussion points.	Some understanding of the topic: processes in the fabrication of dentures. Good (but with some lapses) analysis of protocol governing the dental technician during the fabrication of the dentures and sufficient identification and explanation of the skills needed to complete those processes. Logical structuring and linking of discussion points.	Excellent understanding of the topic: fabrication of dentures. Detailed analysis of protocol governing the technician during the fabrication of the dentures, and clear and concise identification and explanation of the skills needed to complete those processes. Logical structuring and linking of discussion points.
Language Correctness (20%)	Poor written communication skills: grammar, spelling, writing style. Information is not well structured and not easy to read. Weak command of grammar and vocabulary. Lacks ability to summarise and present relevant information in your own words and avoid over-use of direct quotations from text.	Average written communication skills: grammar, spelling, writing style. Information is structured with some lapses and not always easy to read. Moderate command of grammar and vocabulary. Ability to summarise and present relevant information in your own words and avoid over-use of direct quotations from text.	Excellent written communication skills: grammar, spelling, writing style. Information is well structured and easy to read. Good command of grammar and vocabulary. Ability to summarise and present relevant information in your own words and avoid over-use of direct quotations from text.

The rubric on Figure 4.5 above was designed in an attempt to make fully explicit some of the implicit rules and requirements during essay-writing practices with the ECP and first-year students. Using the rubric of Figure 4.5, students were able to interrogate their peers' essay drafts. In so doing, they were engaging in some form of reflection in action. Because this rubric was provided along with the essay assignment, it comprised formative feed forward because students were able to read it and reflect on it before they started writing their essay drafts. (A copy of the complete rubric and essay brief appears in **appendix C3**).

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[10] The complete rubric, together with the essay assignment brief can be seen in Appendix C3.

4.3.4. The Community

Engeström (1987) defines the community in an activity system as comprising different people or groups of people who operate within a specific setting and who share the same general object as distinct from other communities. The community in this study refers to the Collaborative Writing Intervention laboratory. This laboratory is both a physical setting as discussed below and constitutes at-risk ECP and first-year students and peers, subject specific lecturers, academic literacy and information literacy support staff. This section of the study focuses on the community and explores activities of the members of the community within specific contexts and environment.

4.3.4.1.   The computer laboratory

The collaborative essay-writing intervention programme was implemented mainly inside the computer laboratory. Factors such as the layout of the laboratory, the relaxed atmosphere it provided and the facilities that accounted for the decision to use it are examined below.

a.   Layout:

The computer laboratory provided a suitable space for the collaborative intervention partly because of its layout. It was designed to seat thirty students per session, with sufficient spaces provided for the workshop facilitator to provide individual attention to students. Desks and chairs were arranged in groups or in rows as the need arose. The layout provided access for one-to-one as well as group discussion when required. The choice of this type of layout is supported by research that focuses on the design and facilitation of formative feedback interventions. Pryor and Crossmard hold that formative feedback is most effective if it is rendered in an environment in which the 'students can respond to immediately and in a practical way'; as well as to be able to engage in a dialogue with the more knowledgeable other (2010:267). This approach to providing formative feedback was well received by the students and lecturers as seen below:

> We were given time to write our first drafts, and to type it up. Then we went to the workshop in the computer lab and the lecturers gave us help with our introduction. It was good because I could ask for help about stuff that I did not understand from the lecturers directly.

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> One of my classmates also helped me with arranging the format because I am not very good with computers (A'isha, 2014).

Another lecturer commented that:

> When we used the computer lab, myself and the Writing Centre staff were able to get the students to fix up their essay on the spot. I think it was a good way of learning because it provided space for the students to share their ideas and express themselves as individuals, but also as a group (Ms Benedict, 2014).

b.   Using computers in a relaxed and vibrant environment

The computer laboratory provided a relaxed and vibrant learning environment for the students. As seen on Table 4.1, all the students in the class are under 30 years. This age bracket is typically attracted to the use of technology. The computers proved to be an exciting learning tool as indicated below:

> The lecturers showed us how to use the computers for research. They showed us how to check or verify some information, especially how to check spelling for the difficult words. It was really cool because they could help us individually, and sometimes they asked us to work as group. My best moment was when I discovered how to use Google Docs. It was much better than using Track Changes (Gail, 2014).

The lecturers highlighted the pedagogic value of using the computer laboratory for the essay-writing intervention.

> We sometimes forget that there are no end-user computer classes for our students here. I saw how some of the students really struggled with basic typing and use of MS Word. So, for me, the use of the computer lab was a definite plus because I could get the students who are already good with the use of computers to show others who were struggling. This added value to the students' experiences (Ms Benedict, 2014).

The added benefit and values alluded to earlier are of some significance here. It contributes positively to the students' self-worth, identity, and perceptions of power dynamics within the learning environment. They realised that they had more to contribute to the system than being only at the receiving end. One of the students elucidated on this point in Figure 4.6 below:

I felt good because I was able to help the lecturer and some of my classmates. I even showed my lecturer some short cuts in Word. He said that I should apply to work as a tutor when I am in the 3rd year.

Figure 4.6: A writing session in the computer laboratory (Gail, 2014)

4.3.4.2. The lecturers and academic support staff

The lecturers' vast specialist knowledge on the subject was important during the intervention. The majority of the time spent during the intervention in the computer laboratory was directed at supporting students in understanding the concepts required in the essay topic. Lecturers could interrogate the students' knowledge, and direct their attention to areas that the students might have missed or that they are unaware of. The location of the computer laboratory is adjacent to the library. Therefore, the lecturers could access books and other referential materials quickly and make them available to the students. The following excerpts from both the lecturers and students testify to the role played by the lecturers as members of the community:

When we have the tutorial sessions in the computer lab, I focus more on the students' content while the person from the Writing Centre focuses on the students' writing skills. I have found that the students struggle more with the way they think about the topic than with their use of English. Therefore, I assist them with explaining difficult concepts and show them what kinds of resources that they should be reading in order to better understand the topic (Benedict, 2014).

Another lecturer sees her role as being more than just a facilitator. She sees her role as someone who should provide sufficient learner-friendly academic resources to the students as seen below:

In 2013 we piloted the use of the track changes in providing feedback and support to the students. I understand why the Writing Centre people were asking for its use; but when I listened to the students' concerns, I felt that there might be need to try another tool. So, I introduced Google Docs and together with the Writing Centre, we have successfully been able to assist many more students now compared to last year. We must now see how to re-introduce the track changes because it is still very beneficial to the students (Ms Jane, 2014).

The above quotations express the lecturers' perceptions of their roles as members of the community. The students, on the other hand, had mixed reactions with regard to the role of the lecturers as member of the community. Some students were positive of the role of the lecturers in providing formative feedback support while others thought that the lecturers were not always supportive as seen below:

When I went to the Writing Centre, they helped me with my paragraphs and my referencing. But they also told me that my essay was not very sufficient and they asked me to go speak with my lecturer about it. I did, and she helped me understand more about the topic before I completed the second draft (Thabo, 2014).

Another student had a different view of the contribution of the lecturer in the community:

I think that sometimes the lecturers are not very helpful with the feedback that they give us. In the first draft, I read the comments from the lecturer; but it was very difficult to get her in the office to ask things. She was always busy in the lab, and we don't have a session like the

ECP students do in which the lecturers can talk to us directly about our assignment and things like that (Beryl, 2014).

It is evident that lecturers, like other members of the community interacted with the subjects at different levels and shared different experiences. There was intensive collaboration among members of the community so that the subjects reported positive responses as opposed to learning situations in which collaboration was minimal.

4.3.5. The division of labour

By division of labour, activity theorists refer to the roles and responsibilities which members who constitute the community share in order to reach the object jointly (Engeström, 1999). In this study, subjects as well as other members of the community, the lecturers and the literacy support staff all had defined roles and responsibilities in contributing towards a better use of formative feedback during essay-writing practices. These roles and responsibilities are discussed under specific categories below.

a) Planning, orientation and co-ordination

The choice of an action research methodology for this study as discussed in Chapter 2 is informed by the emancipatory appeal of active research (Cohan et al., 2007). This means that participants in this research needed to work according to specific guidelines and with the leadership of a co-ordinator. The planning and design of this collaborative approach to providing formative feedback during essay-writing was coordinated by myself as the researcher; with the support of the three participating lecturers and the Head of Department. Evidence of this is captured in the letter of permission to conduct the research seen in appendix E3.

The orientation with the first-years and ECP students was conducted by a team consisting of the lecturers, staff from the Writing Centre, and those from the Library. During the orientation, a pre-intervention writing exercise was implemented by myself. The ECP and first-year students were provided with valuable information regarding their studies, the discipline, the use of the library and other support services such as the Writing Centre and tutoring. This process was coordinated by the HoD of the

department of Dental Science. Although orientation is generally seen as a basic information dissemination exercise, it is important to examine students' perceptions of this exercise critically. Sometimes, the implications of the information provided are problematic probably because of a lack of detail or insufficient explanation provided as seen in the excerpt below:

> We were told during orientation to take our assignments to the Writing Centre for signature before we submit it. We did not know that they deny to sign our assignment if they don't agree with it. Then, the lecturer deducts marks from our assignment if it was not signed at the Writing Centre. They should have told us all of this during orientation (Ande, 2014).

The above excerpt indicates that the students were informed of the presence of the Writing Centre, but seemed unable to comprehend the role of the Writing Centre in providing academic literacy support during essay-writing activities. This lack of understanding was exacerbated by the nature of the directives contained in departmental rules on assignment writing seen in Figure 4.2 and 4.3 above. Students are informed of the rule that they must have their assignment signed off by the Writing Centre, but information is not provided as to the value of this process.

b) Design, dissemination and implementation of formative feedback

The main focus of this study is to explore how a collaborative approach to the use of formative feedback could improve the essay-writing practices of at-risk first-year and ECP students in the Department of Dental Science. The onus rested on the students to request formative feedback, and for the subject lecturers and literacy support staff to provide such feedback. This section explains how a good understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of different members in the community served to enhance this goal.

Lecturers served as content instructors. They designed the rules of assignment writing, and bore the responsibility of teaching the subject and providing formative feedback on the students' essay drafts. All the lecturers who participated in this study testified to having provided formative feedback to the students during essay-writing. The quality of

the feedback, and how it is transmitted to the student, impacted on the relevance of the feedback to the student as seen in the excerpts below:

> I think that the feedback that the lecturers gave us was really helpful because we were able to fix up our essay and submit an improved final draft. It was also very nice that they let us do the corrections in the computer lab where they could assist us with the assignment immediately. I feel that I passed the essay assignment because of this (Siphokasi, 2014).

Another student who is from the first-year mainstream group commented that:

> I feel bad that the lecturers were not always there to assist us like they assisted the ECP group. They asked us to submit our drafts for feedback, and they wrote the feedback on them, but did not explain what the feedback meant. Many times, they just ask us to refer to our notebook or textbook. This is not very helpful because then, even the Writing Centre could not assist. It was only when we met the tutors that we were able to know what they wanted (Beryl, 2014).

The above excerpts re-echo some of the issues that have already been raised before; such as the quality of the formative feedback provided, and how it is perceived and ultimately interpreted by the student. The feedback is not always detailed enough, or the provider of the feedback, acting as the more knowledgeable other used only one means to convey the feedback: the student might then not be able to understand or use the feedback.

Another finding from the excerpts above related to the need to harmonise the way academic literacy intervention in general is provided to different cohorts of students. As explained in Chapter One of this study, the ECP cohort of students is provided with more time (2yrs) to complete the first-year subjects. This means that they have more time on the timetable for academic literacy and other learning support programmes compared to the mainstream first-years. In this regard, mainstream first-year students who are struggling with essay-writing problems found it more difficult to access support available compared to the ECP group who have regular tutorials.

4.3.6. The object

According to Jonassen and Rohrer-Muphy (1999) the object in an activity system is a product that is either physical or mental, and which the subjects act upon. The object constitutes the central focus of an activity system because it captures the essence of the subjects' intentions and that which actuates the activity system. In this study, the object of the activity is enhanced essay-writing practice by at-risk ECP and first-year students in the Department of Dental Science. The ECP and first-year students' photographs and commentaries during the photovoice presentation, as well as the post-intervention focus group interview, with the lecturers, provided the evidence used in this section.

4.3.6.1.   Evidence from PV presentation

An analysis of students' photovoice presentation revealed the following key issues related to the object: change of perceptions regarding essay-writing; importance of asking questions when in doubt; attitude towards lecturers and literacy support staff; and improved results on these subjects. These are explained below.

a) Change of perceptions towards essay-writing

The dominant theme that emerged during photovoice presentations was that there has been a change in students' perception of essay-writing. Eight out of the nine presenters indicated that they had gained a positive view of writing essay, while one of the presenters indicated that there had been no change in her perception of essay-writing. Those who indicated that there had been a positive change in their essay-writing practices gave different reasons for this change, and used different images to capture this change.

Thabo (2014) for example indicated that when he received his essay from the lecturer, he was 'thrilled' not only because of his grades, but because he could see that the lecturer was awarding ticks for the areas that he had worked on during tutorials. He felt

that this positive recognition of his efforts (as captured in Figure in 4.7 below) changed his perceptions of essay-writing.
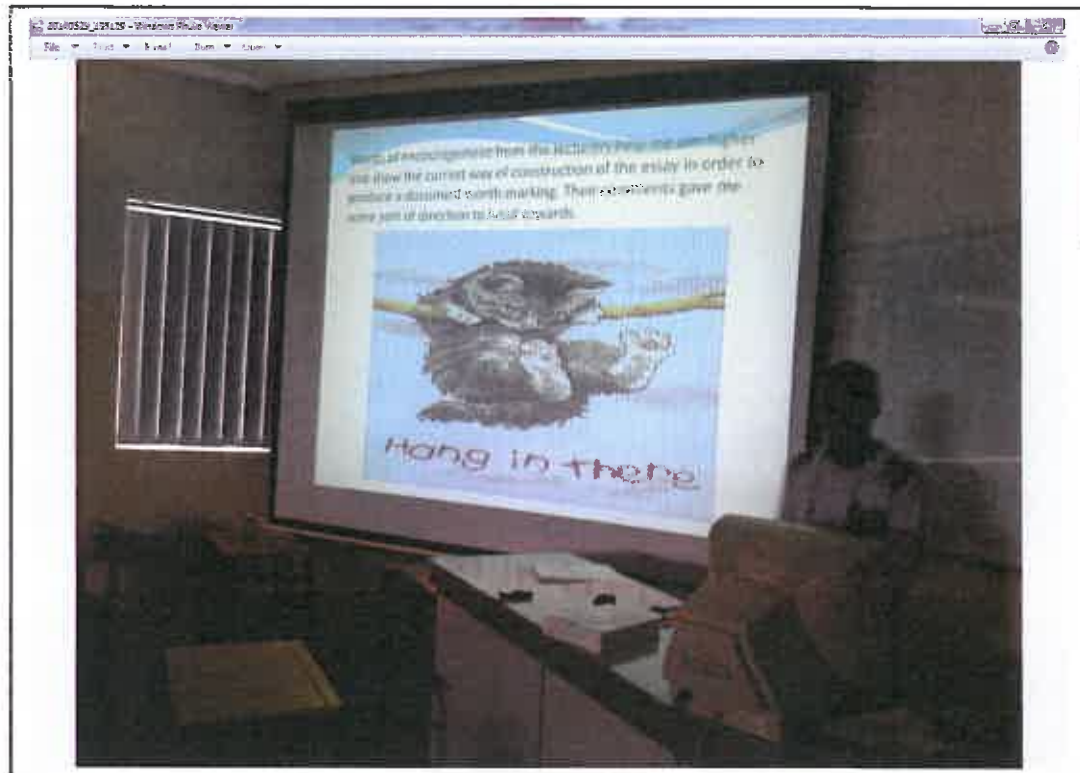
Figure 4.7: Picture from Thabo's (2014) photovoice presentation

A'isha (2014) on the other hand explained that:

> I have never really loved to do writing assignments. One of the main reasons why I really wanted to do Dental Technology was because I was told that most of our work at school will be done in a lab, and we would be busy learning how to manufacture things. I was not prepared for the theory essay assignment. But when we did the tutorials in the computer lab, it felt really good. I am now really looking forward to the next theory assignment (A'isha, 2014).

b) Questioning during formative feedback

As mentioned in Chapter One of this study, the focus of this study is on enhancing the essay-writing practices of at-risk first-year and ECP students. In this regard, a collaborative approach in the provision of formative feedback during essay-writing

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practices emerges as the most pragmatic, effective and theoretically satisfactory mode. Students, serving as subjects in this activity system, performed an active role during collaboration. Evidence of this active participation was seen in terms of students' ability to integrate the quality and efficiency of the formative feedback they received from the lecturers and other academic support staff as seen in the excerpts below:

> I was always told that I should improve my essay by the lecturers. They write that I should check my paragraphs and arguments and such, but they never showed me an example of a very good essay from another faculty (Beryl, 2014).

Gail asserted that:

> One very good positive from this is that I now know that I can approach the lecturers and ask for an explanation if I did not understand the Topic or something that they wrote in my essay draft (Gail, 2014).

The above excerpts indicate that beyond the goal of enhancing essay-writing practices, some of the at-risk ECP and first-year students have developed self-confidence such that they can question issues that they feel are not satisfactory to them. It would seem that, due to the collaborative nature of the intervention, some of the students feel that they can now approach the lecturers and seek clarity on issues that they are struggling with. This supports the arguments provided by Cohen et al. that one of the benefits of action research is its 'emancipatory appeal' (2007:299). This response and personal growth supports the view that formative feedback is more effective if students and lecturers engage in a dialogue.

c) Students' perceptions towards lecturers and support staff

Another important theme that emerged from the students' photovoice presentation was that of the students' perceptions of the lecturers and the Writing Centre staff, especially during essay-writing tutorials. Some students reported that at first they dreaded the possibility of asking for help from the lecturers because that may reflect badly on the way the lecturers regard them. Laiba stated that:

> In the past, I was scared to ask for assistance from the lecturers. I was scared that the lecturers will think we stupid. But when we were doing the writing drafts in the computer lab,

the lecturers asked us about our difficulties and they were very helpful. That helped us to speak about our assignments and also to visit the Writing Centre (Laiba, 2014).

Venter (2014) reported that:

> When I went to the Writing Centre, I thought that I will just give them my draft and later collect it fixed. I was surprised when they called me and then asked me to go back and speak to my lecturer about what I wanted to say on the denturism. This was new to me because I did go back to the lecturer who also assisted me (Venter, 2014).

These two excerpts indicated that it is necessary to have an open and conducive atmosphere between the students and staff in order to achieve proper, meaningful dialogue. As noted in the literature review, dialogue is an essential element in any collaborative intervention.

d) Improved results in Dental Theory essay assignments

I noticed during the photovoice presentation that only two students indicated that the formative feedback that they received during the collaborative intervention contributed to their final results for the theory assignment. Siphokasi explained:

> I used to ask the lecturer to tell my mark that they think I could get after each tutorial session. In this I was able to know whether I am improving. So I was not very surprised when I got my final marks (Siphokasi, 2014).

On the other hand, the remaining seven presenters all indicated that they were happy to submit their final draft. They used different pictures to capture this happy mood. One such picture is that used by Thabo (2014) as seen in Figure 4.7. It is not yet clear whether the students' expressed happiness after submitting their final essays is out of relief or because they are aware of having improved in their performance.

4.3.6.2. Lecturers' perception of the object

The lecturers spent some time reflecting on the object of this activity system: this dedication was captured during the post-intervention focus group interview. In this

regard, lecturers were unanimous that there have been some remarkable improvements in the students' final term essays as seen in the excerpt below:

> For me, all the students who actively attended and participated in the tutorials all had significant improvements in their results. But those who attended and did not actively participate are still struggling to get a pass mark (Ms Benedict, 2014).

Another lecturer explained that she was confident of the students' improvements but wondered whether they would keep performing in this way:

> Those who submitted drafts in Google Docs and who followed the comments and feedback that we provided are evidently doing better than those who did not. I have an open door policy and I always encourage students to come speak with me if they don't understand something. I hope that they will be able to perform like this in the second semester and next year (Ms Jane, 2014).

From the two excerpts above, it is clear that lecturers are looking beyond the results of students' term essays. It demonstrates that lecturers are concerned to see students' improving their knowledge and essay-writing skills and that they are able to apply such knowledge independently as they advance in their studies.

4.4. An integration of the six components of activity theory

In this chapter, the sections explained the collaborative intervention in essay-writing practices for at-risk first-year and ECP students in terms of the individual components of activity theory. The aim is to shift from the focus on the individual components to examine how activity theory provides a solid cultural lens with which to holistically integrate the impact of the collaborative formative feedback intervention (Engeström, 2008:7). In this section, I examine three inter-related sub-systems, before finally integrating them to form a complete holistic activity system.

4.4.1. Subject-tools-object activity system

The first sub-system is that depicting the subject, the tools, and the object as seen below:
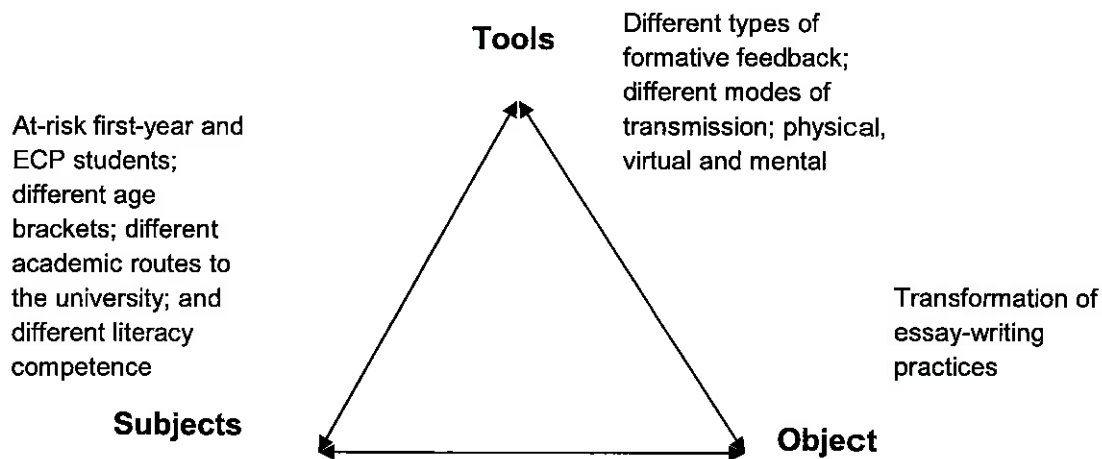
Figure 4.8: Subject - tools – object sub-system

Figure 4.8 above presents the first activity sub-system analysed in this study. It depicts the different elements that constitute the subject in the activity system. The ECP and first-year students who are the subjects of this activity system have different age brackets, and have come to the university from different backgrounds. Some have been away from formal schooling for two or more years, while others obtained admission directly after matriculation. The students have different academic literacy competencies, and different attitudes towards essay-writing. The interpretation here is that the students do not constitute a homogenous entity. While diversity poses certain challenges, I borrow from the works of Boughey (2012) and Boughey and McKenna (2001a) to argue that such diversity, as evidenced by our students, can represent rich historical and social-cultural capital that can influence learning positively.

Figure 4.8 depicts how formative feedback serves as a tool in the activity system. The modes of transmission of this tool, as well as the different types of formative feedback, have been discussed. The focus of the interpretation here is on how the tools serve as mediating artefacts for subjects to achieve their object. In this regard, it is evident that synchronous and asynchronous formative feedback used in this intervention, as well as the students' active participation via means of questions enhances students' essay-writing practices. This is so because tools aid the transformation process (Hardman,

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2005). These tools can be physical (such as computers or actual papers), virtual (such as use of Google Docs) or mental (such as interpretation and perceptions of formative feedback that are provided); and as such, serve as mediating artefacts (Rohrer-Murphy, 1999).

4.4.2. Subject – rules – community activity system

I have already explained what the subject in this activity system entails as seen in Figure 4.8 above. What constitute the rules and the community in the activity system is discussed here. Cole and Engeström (1993:6) explain that 'collective social activity' contributes to the growth of the mind. In this regard, interaction between the subjects and the other members of the community must take place under a given set of rules. Figure 4.9 below captures the explicit and implicit rules that govern this activity system as well as the elements of the community.

Subjects
At-risk first-year
and ECP students

Explicit rules: seen through various documents (instructions) and assignment briefs and rubrics; **implicit rules**: open to individual interpretations and perceptions of relationships

Lecturers; academic support staff (from library, writing centre and IT centre); students

Rules   **Community**

Figure 4.9: Subject – rules – community sub-system

In the Literature Review and elsewhere in Chapter Four, I have indicated, by quoting from various sources the wide range and varied nature of students who register as undergraduates in Universities. They possess a wealth of skills and cultural/intellectual attributes which could form signifiers of power and identity. Archer argues that the academic literacy approach adopted by many South African universities' Writing Centres has the potential to develop students' writing competencies; especially those for whom epistemological access and retention within a specific disciple might be a

challenge (2008). In a typical activity system, the rules that govern the interaction between the subject and the rest of the community have a direct bearing on the object of the activity. In the case of this study, some of the rules that were meant to be explicit served a contrary role. These rules were indeed implicit when interpreted viz-a-viz their impact on the subjects. One glaring example is the set of rules contained in the rubric (see Figure 4.3). It can be argued that certain members of the community might unconsciously design rules that act as obstacles to the students' achieving their objectives. Boughey sees such intervention, like the one used in this study, as a means of empowering and affirming the voices of students who might otherwise be silenced (2012:136). The new rubric proposed in Figure 4.5 is an example of how rules can be made explicit such that they can assist the student achieves what Brady and Pritchard call 'epistemic virtues' (2003:5). The relaxed and vibrant environment, as well as the availability of computers in close proximity with the library ensures that the community can provide a space for dialogue and mediation such that the object of the activity system can be achieved.

4.4.3. Object – community - division of labour

The third activity system to be discussed is that containing the Object, community, and division of labour. I have already explored what the community constitutes in Figure 4.9 above as well as what the object is in Figure 4.8 above. Division of labour is another element of the activity system that denotes the different roles and responsibilities that members of the community are charged with. In this study, it has been demonstrated how at-risk ECP and first-year students as well as lecturers and the Writing Centre staff assume their respective roles and responsibilities during the collaborative intervention. The lecturers and Writing Centre staff assume the planning and coordination responsibilities during the collaborative intervention. Students collaborate with the lecturers and the Writing Centre staff in the dissemination and implementation of the formative feedback.

Interaction of the subjects in an activity system with the artefact produces developmental transformation which occurs within the context of a given set of rules and division of labour. Such transformation could be noticed by means of history, the individual or moment-to-moment (Russel, 2002:65). Figure 4.10 below shows a conglomeration of the three sub-systems into one main activity system:

Different types of formative feedback; different modes of transmission; physical, virtual and mental

Tools

At-risk first-year and ECP students; different age brackets; different academic routes to the university; and different literacy competence

Transformation of essay-writing practices

Subjects

Object

Explicit rules: seen through various documents (instructions) and assignment briefs and rubrics; **implicit rules**: open to individual interpretations and perceptions of relationships

Roles of students and lecturers; responsibilities of students, lecturers, and support staff

Rules

Community

Division of labour

Lecturers; academic support staff (from library, writing centre and IT centre); students

Figure 4.10: The main activity system

Figure 4.10 above serves as a consolidation of what was obtained in the findings, and depicts the main elements of the activity system and how they represent the collaborative formative feedback strategy for the ECP and first-year students.

4.5. Conclusion

The aim of this study, as captured in the main research question, is: How can a collaborative approach in the provision of formative feedback enhance the essay-writing practices of ECP and first-year students?" This aim is represented as the object in the activity system seen on Figure 4.10 above. That activity system identifies different formative feedback strategies and how they are used by subjects and the community in order to obtain the object. It shows how members of the community assume different roles and responsibilities, as well as how they are guided by certain explicit and implicit rules.

It is clear that Figure 4.10 summarises the essence of Chapter Four by expounding on how the main research question is answered. Chapter Five presents an interpretation of these findings and offers some recommendations as a final response to the research aims and objectives.

Chapter Five

Conclusions and recommendations

5.1. Introduction

This final chapter of the study focuses primarily on providing some recommendations, and making concluding remarks on the investigation. In order to do this successfully, the chapter first provides an overview of the study, and then interprets the findings that were presented in the penultimate chapter, before making recommendations. The implications of the findings of this research in terms of addressing the issues related to collaborative formative feedback intervention during essay-writing practices for at-risk ECP and first-year students are set out in detail. The chapter ends by identifying some of the limitations of this research; and suggesting potential further research in this area of research.

5.2. Overview of the study

The aim of this study was to determine the impact of a collaborative approach in the design and use of formative feedback during essay-writing practices with at-risk ECP and first-year students. The research was prompted by concerns from both national and international experts on issues of literacy in general and academic writing proficiency in particular, of first-year university students (Hunter & Tse, 2013; Paxton, 2007; Lillis & Scott, 2007). This research focused on at-risk ECP and first-year students in the Department of Dental Sciences at a University of Technology. These students were at risk of failing Dental Theory essay assignments partly because of their weak academic writing practices. The collaborative approach in the use of formative feedback was therefore designed with the aim of bringing together students, lecturers and writing centre staff such that they can actively contribute in the design and dissemination of formative feedback. The rationale behind this approach emanates from the suggestion that, because of the dominant and prominent role of essays in higher education assessment, a suitable approach that supports ECP and first-year students who may not be proficient in the discourse of academic writing, is necessary (Hunter & Tse, 2013;

Hemmati & Soltanpour, 2012; Jacobs, 2006; Lillis, 2001). This study encapsulates the results of this collaborative approach in the provision of formative feedback and highlighting impacts upon the essay-writing practices of ECP and first-year students, and their lecturers.

In Chapter Two of this study, the key variables of this research were explored. The chapter opened with a review of research on essay-writing in higher education, before exploring research around formative feedback, critical thinking and academic literacy intervention practices in higher education institutions. The role of collaboration in academic literacy interventions and academic development practices were foregrounded from the point of view of researchers such as Lea and Street (2006), Lillis and Scott (2007), Jacobs (2006; 2010), Paxton (2007), Barnett (2009), and Underhill and McDonald (2010). A discussion of the origins of activity theory, its development and how an activity system can provide a unit of analysis, is provided in the latter part of Chapter Two. Activity theory is applied in this study: based on Engeström's (1999) model.

Chapter Three focused on research methodology and data collection techniques used in this study. Motivation was offered for the choice of a qualitative action research methodology; within which the rationale for the tools used to collect data was explained. Data was collected using focus group interviews, photovoice presentation, students' essay drafts as well as selected departmental documents dealing with students' assignments.

The use of those methods discussed in Chapter Three resulted in a number of findings that were captured in Chapter Four. These findings were discussed within the context of activity theory. The findings were studied by integrating key elements of activity theory: subjects, tools, object, rules, community, and division of labour. In order to gain more focus and clarity, a number of sub-activity systems were identified and explained, leading up to the main activity system. This strategy facilitated analysis of the effect of the collaborative approach in the design and use of formative feedback during essay-writing practices.

The findings in Chapter Four indicate that the collaborative approach in the design and use of formative feedback has a largely beneficial effect on the essay-writing practices of ECP and first-year students, as well as lecturers who make up part of the community. The following serve as indicators of these positive effects:

- The strategies used in the design and dissemination of formative feedback by both lecturers and the students during essay-writing practices have changed. This was reported during the focus group interviews with the lecturers, as well as during the photovoice presentations with the students.
- There has been a positive change in the quality of essays that many of the students submitted post intervention as reported during the post intervention focus group interviews, as well as seen in the excerpts of the students' final term essays.
- The findings from the photovoice presentation by the students indicated that there has been an impact on the students' perceptions and attitudes towards essay-writing.
- There is a positive change in the way some of the rules on essay-writing are transmitted to the students as seen in the changes made on the essay rubric.
- There is a change in the way lecturers perceive the students and the skills that the students bring to the classroom.

These findings impact on the following elements of the activity system: the subject, the tools, the object, the rules, as well as the community.

5.3. The impact of the collaborative use of formative feedback during essay-writing practices

The findings reported in Chapter Four will now be analysed under three broad categories:

- Formative feedback, essay-writing practices and the notion of interim academic literacy.
- Collaboration, division of labour, and rules of essay-writing.
- Perceptions and attitudes as signifiers of power relations between the subjects and the community.

These three categories are explained in detail below.

5.3.1. Formative feedback, essay-writing practices, and students' interim literacies

Earlier on in Chapter Two, a definition and explanation of interim literacies as a concept within the academic literacies discourse (Paxton, 2007) was provided. As indicated therefore, interim academic literacies as a concept provide academic literacies practitioners with a tool with which to align the students' previous experiences and interactions with that of their immediate academic environment and practices. Gee explains that if a student lacks mastery of a 'dominant primary discourse', he/she will seek to use secondary discourse in place of primary discourse (1996:28). Drafts of students' essays aptly reflected how students grapple with primary and secondary discourses. These drafts can be analysed at two levels:

a) Surface/structural elements

Requirements of students' theory essay assignments included the need for the use of good grammar, appropriate language style, respect for the structure of an academic essay and an implementation of formatting requirements. These elements have collectively been referred to as 'surface textual features' by several commentators in the field of academic literacies, such as Paxton (2007:40) and Kress (2004:31). The findings from the students' first essay drafts suggest that they may not be aware of these requirements, or that they may not be sufficiently skilled to apply the rules. Gail's draft for example is structured like a poem, and the paragraphs look like verses. While there are not too many issues with grammar, the structure and format do not meet the requirements for an academic essay as outlined in the department's rules for essay-writing. The dominant use of the personal pronoun 'I' by the student is understandable considering that the essay required of the student to give an account of her experiences. However, the use of the active voice in students' essays is not allowed in many science faculties including the department of Dental Sciences (Lea & Street, 2006; Hyland, 2002).

In the students' final essay drafts, there is evidence that they are embracing some of these structural requirements. Their essays now have clear headings and sub-headings, with acceptable line spacing and use of fonts. This confirms what Lea and Street (2006) refer to as genre switching. The student has started to use the passive voice more effectively, as seen in Figure 5.1 below.

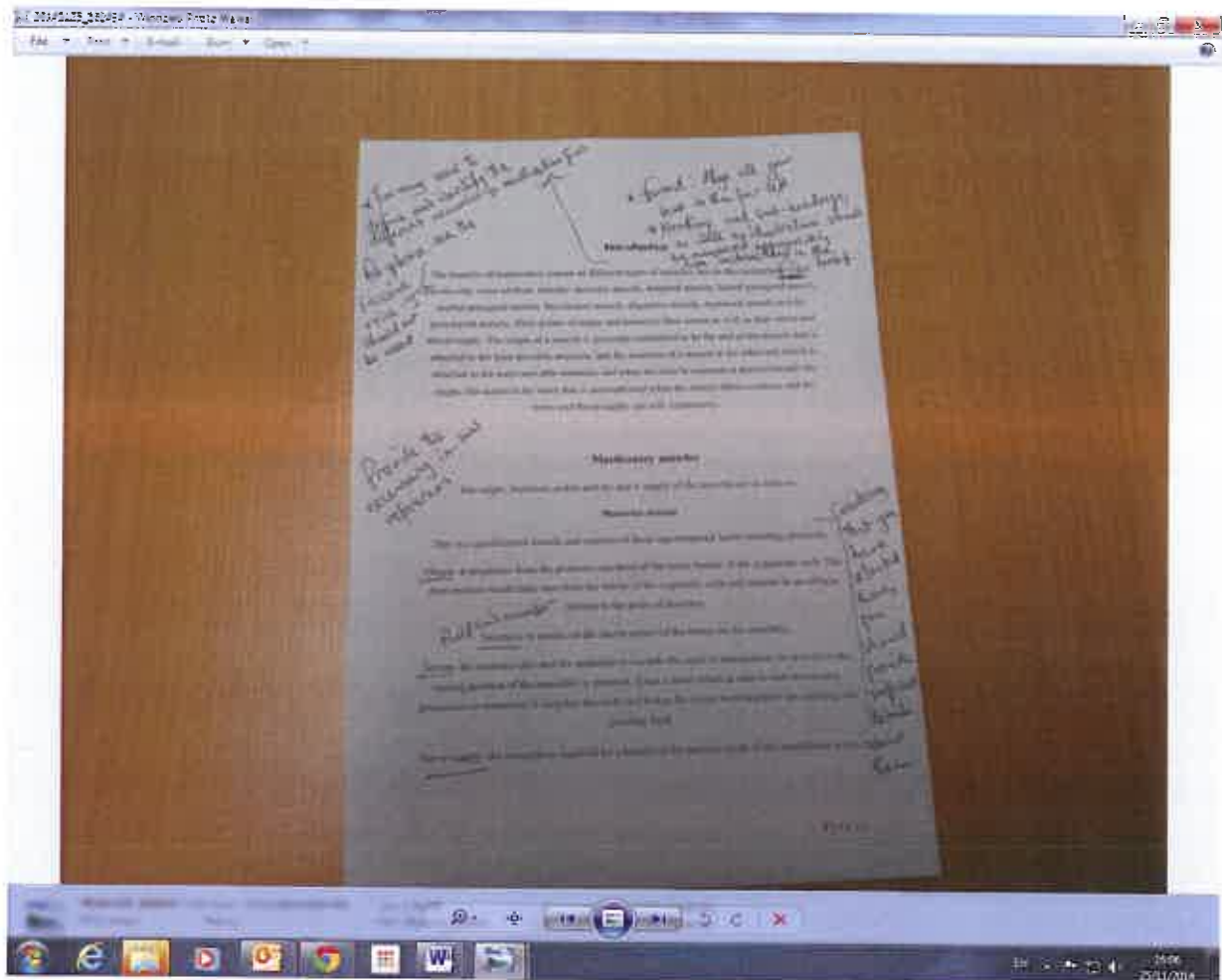**Figure 5.1: Students' interim grasp of surface/structural requirements in essay-writing**

b) Argument and explanation of conceptual elements of the essay

Deeply embedded in some of the students' final essay drafts are elements of arguments that demonstrate the students' grasp of the conceptual issues in the essay. This is not always evident in the first drafts. For example, Divine's first draft (seen in Figure 5.2

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below) does not adequately outline the aim of the essay. As such, the paragraphs seem to raise different ideas that do not support each other. The student seems to struggle with the use of appropriate subject vocabulary. The lecturer who read this draft raised those issues as seen in Figure 5.2 below.

In Divine's final draft, there is a clear attempt to link ideas in the essay so that they support each other and form a coherent whole. The student does this by making a clear statement of purpose in the introduction. The student indicated the rationale of the essay and proposed a clear approach used to address the issues.
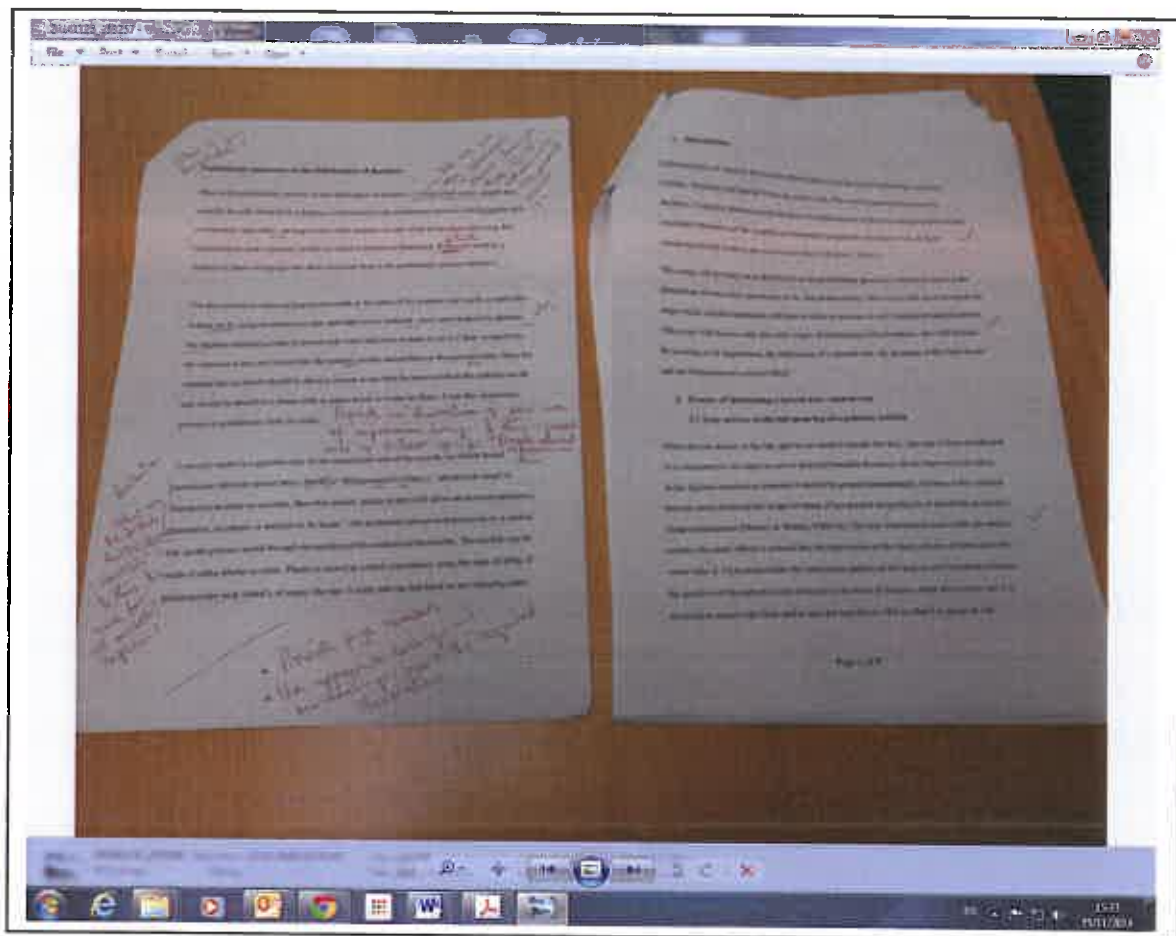

Figure 5.2: Conceptual and argumentative elements

Divine has managed to use some of the discipline's terminologies as requested by the lecturer. The student is trying to explain the concepts in the essay topic. However, in a

desperate attempt to demonstrate argumentative competence in the discipline, the student has borrowed extensively from secondary resources; sometimes directly lifting portions from journal articles. This is plagiarism, and in so doing, the student's voice is lost. I therefore borrow from the concept of interim literacies in order to locate the space occupied by this student in the journey towards academic writing competence and independence of expression. The student is at the stage of 'initiation' into the discourses of the discipline (Paxton, 2007:51); their essay drafts indicate that the students are at the stage of induction and transformation is beginning. They are at a nascent stage of academic literacy acquisition.

It should be noted that the lecturer asked for proof of argument; she wanted a clear and detailed explanation from the student. This confusion between what an argument or an explanation mean in academic writing has been captured by Crème and Lea (2008) when they explain what an argument means in student writing. A careful reading of the marking of the students' final essay drafts by the subject-specific lecturers demonstrates that what they term an argument is indeed a clear and detailed explanation. This is seen in Figure 5.4 where the student's final draft received a pass for argument. The lecturer confirms that the argument is contained in the clear explanations provided by the student.

c) Some other elements of the discipline's writing style

One other distinctive element that emerged from the formative feedback provided by the lecturers on the students' essay drafts concerns the use of visuals. As mentioned earlier, Dental Technology is a highly practical discipline with intensive use of visuals during laboratory practical sessions as well as the theoretical essays that the students are expected to submit. In Figure 5.3 below, lecturers provided formative feedback on a student's use of illustrations. The feedback mainly pointed at how the student should use illustrations. These illustrations are derived from the student's practical work in the Dental Laboratory. The lecturer is expecting some form of discussion or explanation around the use of the illustrations and the processes in the laboratory. One can conclude that, in terms of formative feedback use or academic literacy in general, the

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lecturer might be at an interim phase of development. This conclusion is seen from the quality of the lecturer's feedback on Figure 5.3 below
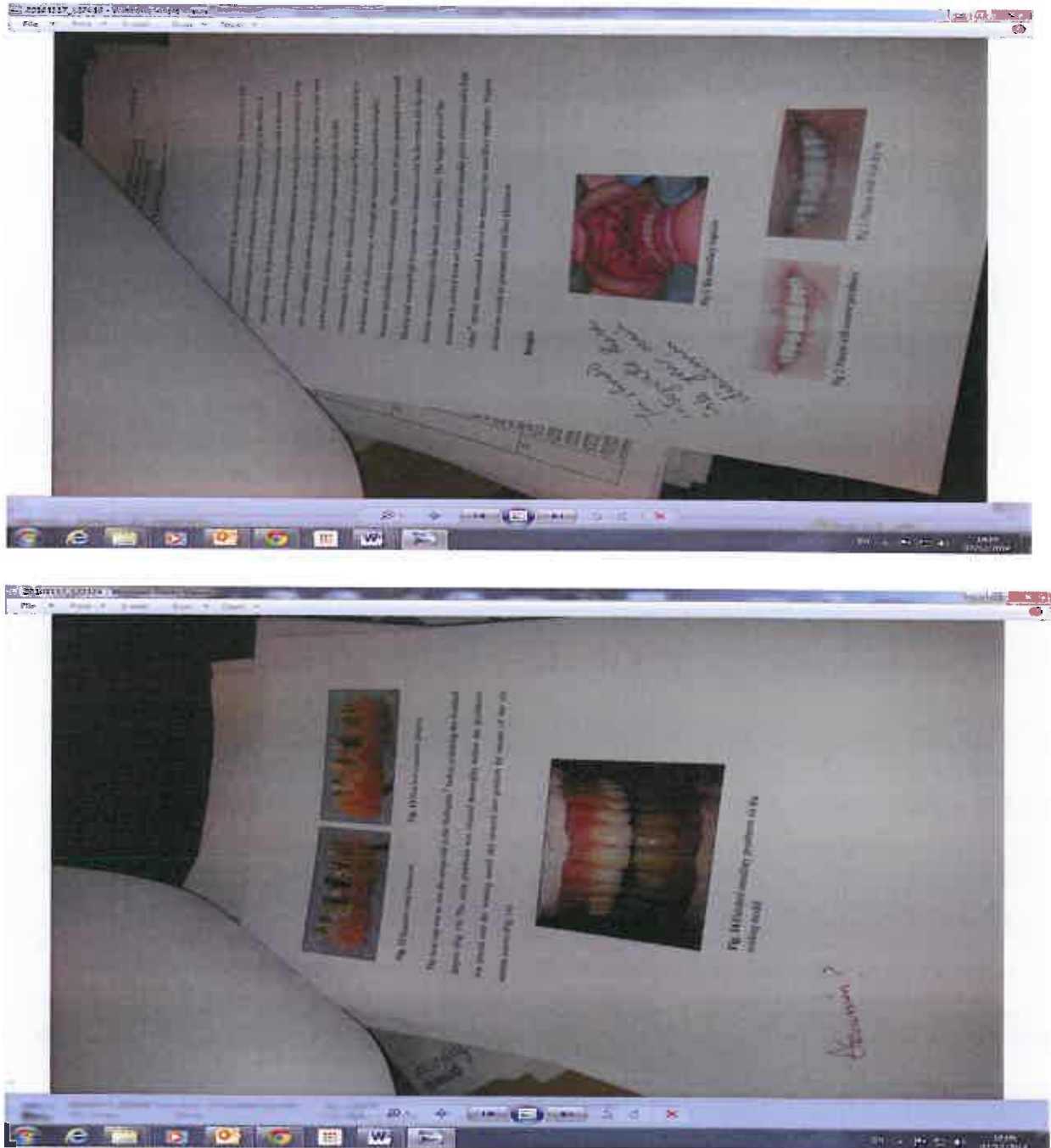
Figure 5.3: Student's inadequate use of illustrations

Figure 5.3 above shows two instances of students grappling with the use of visuals in their theoretical assignments. They were expected to integrate those illustrations in the appropriate sections of the explanation: not isolate them. The lecturer expected the students to explain clearly the process captured in a specific picture. Once that is done, the student typically receives a pass for that section of the essay as seen in Figure 5.4 below.
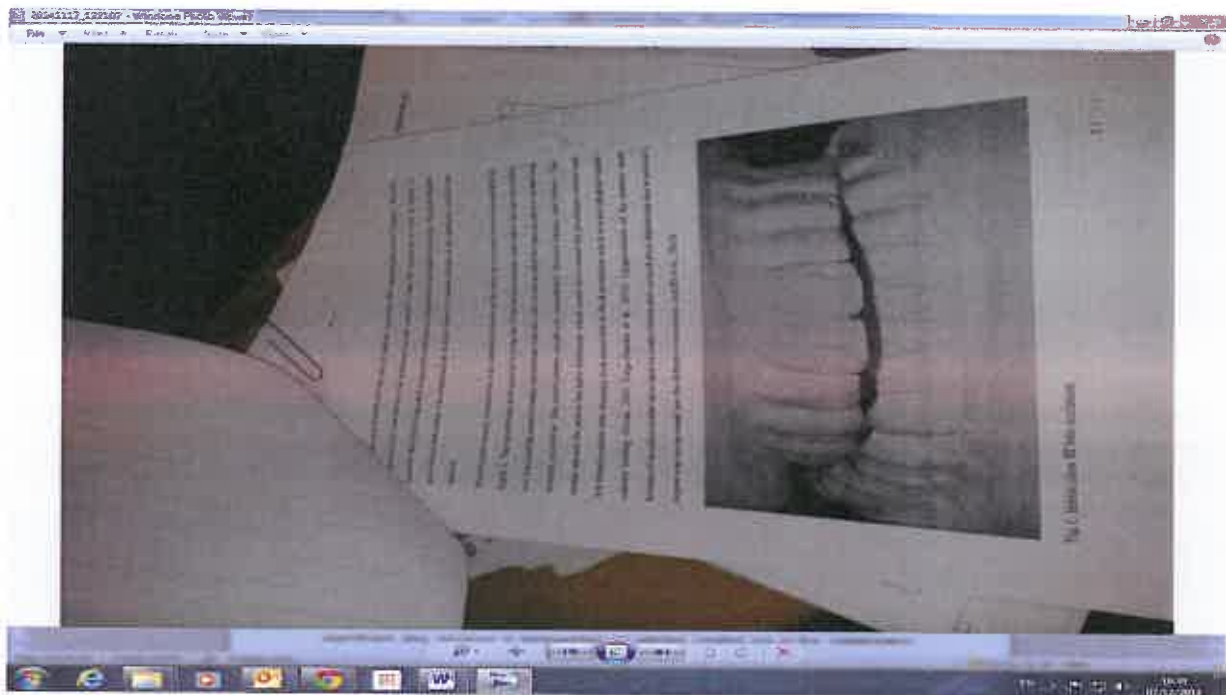
Figure 5.4: Student's adequate use of illustration

5.3.2. Collaboration, division of labour, and rules of essay-writing

Collaboration is a central theme in this research. The use of action research as a methodological frame enhances the notion of collaboration (Makoelle, 2012b). The findings in Chapter Four highlight the issue of collaboration between students serving as subjects, and the lecturers and literacy support staff serving as members of the community who use formative feedback during essay-writing. The findings show that improved collaboration between these parties was demonstrated through the change in the rules and requirements for academic essays, as well as in improved access for support provided by the lecturers and academic literacy support staff. There is a new

and detailed rubric that was used as opposed to the previous rubric which provided fewer details to the students during essay-writing practices. The use of this new rubric was significant: it represented an artefact formed out of the collaboration between subjects and other members of the community. In this sense, both lecturers and students were transformed: their transformation is signified by the creation and use of a new artefact; the rubric (Barnett, 2009).

The element of division of labour is present as an aspect of the findings. The increased awareness of the responsibilities which members of the community exhibited is proof of this awareness of division of labour. The rubrics and quality of students' final essay drafts demonstrate shared effort. The rubric spells out in detail what the ECP and first-year students are expected to do in order to obtain a pass mark for the essay. It therefore amends and reinforces the rules governing interaction between subjects and the community in their quest to achieve the object of the activity system. Figure 5.5 below depicts the section of the activity system that is influenced by the subject – community interaction with the rules.
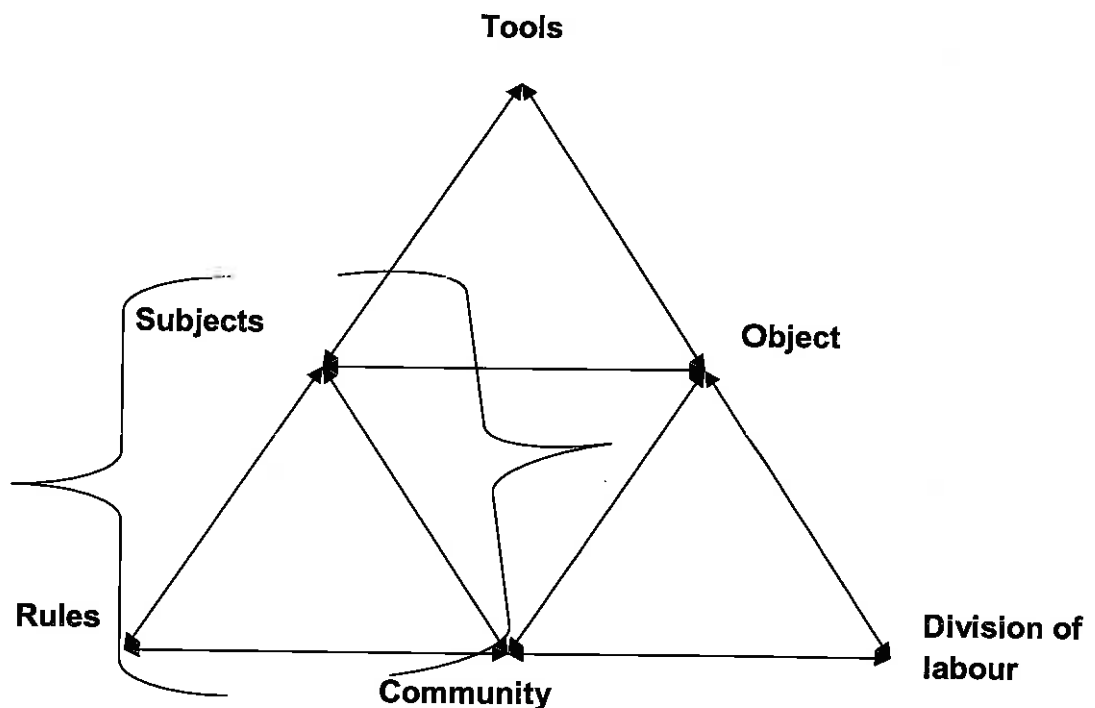

Figure 5.5: Section of activity system influenced by subject – community interaction

Figure 5.5 above highlights how interaction between the subject and the community sometimes fails to foreground the tools and the object of the activity. It is dominated by a close collaboration between community and subject with regards to how the rules are applied, and how duties and responsibilities are shared within the system.

5.3.3. Perceptions and attitudes as signifiers of power relations between the subjects and the community

Collaboration is the integration of perception and attitudes towards formative feedback, in particular, and academic writing, in general. Findings in Chapter Four suggest that ECP and first-year students share some perceptions about essay-writing in general, as well as the type and nature of formative feedback in particular, which differed from those held by lecturers. The content-subject lecturers created a different perception of the ECP and first-year students, especially with regard to the kinds of skills that they bring to the classroom. This divergence in perception influences subjects' and community's attitudes towards formative feedback specifically and essay-writing in general. During interactions between subjects and members of the community, it became clear that their attitude towards formative feedback and essay-writing has been influenced by pre-conceived perceptions. The dialogue that ensued between students and lecturers brought to the fore certain misconceptions, and thus allowed participants to adopt a collaborative approach in using formative feedback during essay-writing. This was evident during the interactive collaborative tutorial sessions in the computer laboratory, as well as in the collaboration that led to the design of the new rubric.

Another key element that emerged from the findings in relation to perception and attitude has to do with the subjects and the community's perceptions of academic literacy intervention. It was seen in the findings that many of the ECP and first-year students as well as some of the lecturers perceived the Writing Centre as a 'fix-it-shop'. Some students thought that once they 'sent' their essays to the Writing Centre, they would be 'returned' as 'fixed'. Lecturers felt that once they referred students to the Writing Centre, students would later submit 'fixed' essays. These perceptions have been identified in many other studies such as Hunter and Tse (2013), Lea and Street

(2006), and Jacobs (2006). Such perceptions negatively affect the way participants approach essay-writing activities. As reported in the findings, the collaborative approach in the use of formative feedback during essay-writing contributed in changing these perceptions. The fact that one of the lecturers was participating in a CHEC staff development course titled *Transforming Tutorials in Higher Education* as reported during the focus group interview might suggest that the lecturer was exposed to readings and theories on collaboration during tutorials, as well as collaborative practices in academic literacies. Experiences drawn from such staff development courses can be beneficial to the students and department alike (community); evidenced by the lecturer's use of Google Drive to facilitate collaborative online consultation during essay-writing.

Figure 5.6 below shows the section of an activity system that deals with the perception and attitudes towards formative feedback.
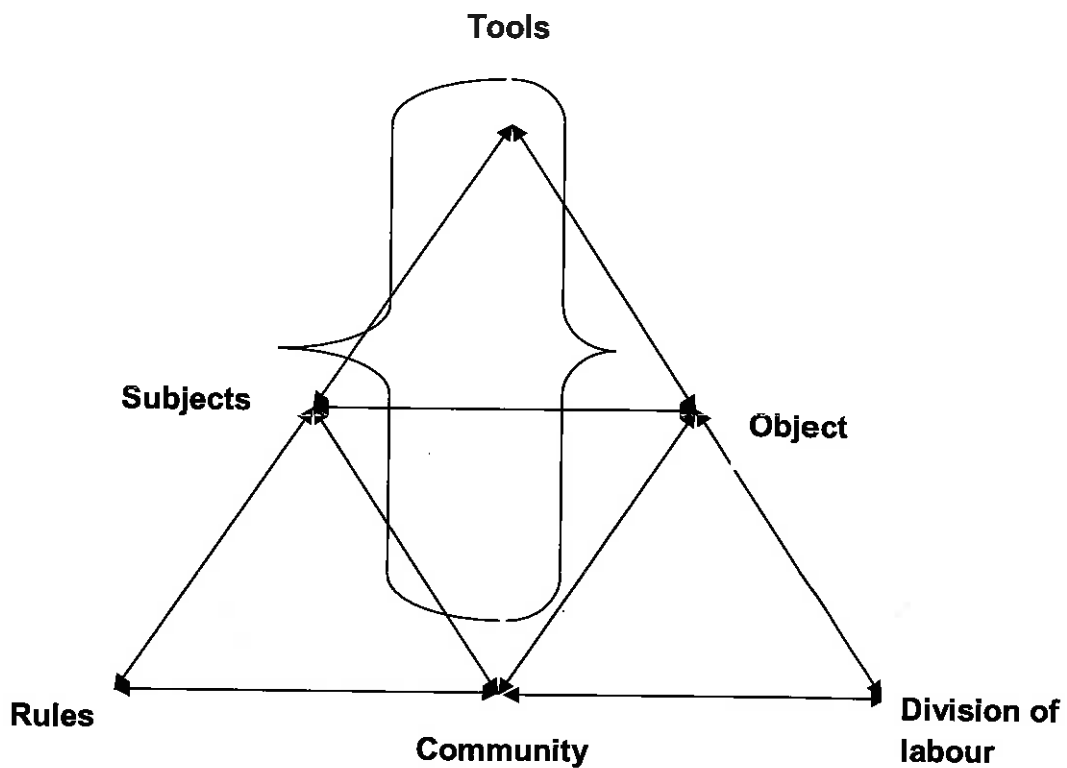
Tools

Subjects

Object

Rules

Community

Division of labour

Figure 5.6: Section of activity system demonstrating influence of perceptions and attitudes

From Figure 5.6 above it is evident that perceptions about formative feedback and attitudes towards essay-writing practices emanated from the subjects and members of the community. Their understanding and applications of the rules affected how they divide roles and responsibilities amongst themselves. Evidence from the students' first drafts suggests that when these perceptions and attitudes are not properly interrogated by stakeholders, the object of the activity system is usually not what was expected. Due to the on-going collaborative approach in the design and dissemination of formative feedback, these perceptions are continuously being challenged. The dialogues that took place between the subjects and the community improved the way the tools (the formative feedback, rubrics) were used and thus justified the object of the activity system (which is improved essays submitted). This interpretation is in line with what other researchers have previously observed. For example, Underhill and McDonald explain that 'identity and voice' are central in a student's writing and influence the student's perception of his/her place and power within the historical context of South African higher education (2010:92). It is therefore argued that holistic collaborative academic development support for students will be pivotal in recognising and validating the voice and identity of those students whose backgrounds may not support strong literacies practices (Underhill & McDonald, 2010).

5.4. Recommendations

The recommendations presented here should be understood within the context and setting of this research. The research setting was the Department of Dental Sciences in a University of Technology. These recommendations can be transferred and applied to other departments within the Faculty and within the University. The analysis of these findings and conclusions drawn could be applicable to other academic units in need of such interventions, but the reader should be careful not to over-generalise these findings because they reflect an immediate, specific context and socio-linguistic setting.

5.4.1. Transforming approaches to teaching student writing in a science discipline: from essays to free writing and back to essays

Findings in Chapter Four showed that an academic essay is the principal form of assessment in the Dental Theory subject. This infers that students' essays are 'high stakes' assessment tools (Lillis & Scott, 2007:9). The findings demonstrated that many of the students had a different perception about the demands of academic writing in the context of their department. Students demonstrated a negative attitude towards writing in general and essay-writing in particular. Based on this, it is recommended that other forms of writings such as free writing, blog contribution, or reflective portfolios, should be encouraged as a means of inducting students into the discourse of academic writing. Studies by Hemmati and Soltanpour (2012), as well as Hunter and Tse (2013) can serve as models that the department could adopt.

One of the advantages of this approach is that it will help lecturers to initiate students' writing journey in an exciting way. It will allow lecturers to be able to scaffold the writing interventions and embed writing activities to meet the discipline's modal demands. Finally, it may stimulate a debate on the place and understanding of multimodal texts as teaching and assessment tools within a department (Archer, 2011; Thesen, 2001). This debate could challenge the dominance of 'word-focused' ways of communicating within the academic departments (Thesen, 2001:133) and show how a multimodal approach could benefit learning.

5.4.2. Transforming the writing centre and the computer laboratory: an activity theory approach

From the findings, it was evident that several of the writing interventions occurred inside the computer laboratory and in the writing centre. This environment supported and contributed to the essay-writing interventions. It was clear from the findings that the environment was not designed to support an interactive exchange of formative feedback during an essay-writing intervention programme. The computers and seats are fixed to the floor. This fixed equipment limited the ability of the facilitators in adapting the computer laboratory for optimal interactive tutorial sessions.

The computer laboratory can seat only twenty-five students per session. It lacked a number of important articles of software and hardware that support academic literacy interventions. The management of the department should consider the following:

i. Redesign the computer laboratory to seat at least 50 students per session. It should be designed in such a way that it can be adapted for sessions with smaller numbers of students; but with optimal interactivity during tutorials. As such, the seats and desks should not be permanently attached to the floor, but should be moveable. The computer and internet access points, as well as the seating arrangements should be designed in such a way that small tutorial sessions could be more interactive and intimate.

ii. The department should consider providing relevant computer hardware such as microphone and earphones, a digital tape-recorder, and speakers. They should provide software that supports the editing of audio and video materials, as well as apps that could translate from English to a relevant South African home language and vice versa.

The two suggestions above were adopted from the works of Singer, Krajcik and Marx (2013), as well as studies by Higgins, Mercier, Burd and Hatch (2011). Higgins et al. propose a model that seeks to enhance collaboration between lecturers, learners and computers (2011). The work of Singer et al. recommends a model in which the computer hardware and software are easily adaptable and can be integrated into different classroom settings (2013). The financial constraints and the technological resources available within the department were considered before recommendations were made.

5.4.3. Transforming the way we perceive students and their realities: a learning analytics approach.

A dominant theme that emerged from the findings in Chapter Four is that of differing perceptions of students, lecturers and their attitudes towards formative feedback and essay-writing skills. It was noted in the findings that students do not constitute a homogenous entity. The findings demonstrated that students come to the university with varied realities, different lived experiences, capabilities and heterogeneous proficiencies. Because of this diversity, students perceive and interpret formative

feedback differently. In situations in which subject lecturers do not demonstrate awareness of the varied nature of the student body, the design and implementation of formative feedback support during essay-writing could be compromised.

Learning analytics is proposed as a possible and efficient tool that can be used to collect valuable data on student diversity and proficiency within the first week of registration. Learning analytics is the gathering of data about students and the interpretation of such data viz-a-viz the student's learning context (Dietz-Uhler & Hurn, 2013; Long & Siemens, 2011). Learning analytics could therefore be used to provide valuable data that the academic departments and the Writing Centre could use in the planning of academic literacies interventions. The Department of Dental Sciences in particular, as well as the Faculty of Health and Wellness Sciences in general, could adopt the learning analytics model proposed by Dietz-Uhler and Horn (2013), Greller and Drachsler (2012), and Olmos and Corrin (2012).

5.5. Limitations of this study

Much research at MEd level, similar to this one, often faces the same kinds of challenges such as lack of time and the narrow scope of the study. Typically, as a post-graduate student, this research project had to be completed within two years. This imposed severe constrains such as that of time, and availability of resources (both financial and material). Two significant factors restricted this study to some extent:

- Field notes and observations as techniques to collect data could have been used
- A longer period and a larger scope of intervention via a repeat cycle of the action research design involving more departments was needed

This research is couched within the framework of emancipatory action research. Such a framework supports the use of tools such as observation and field notes during data collection. The researcher's observations and field notes could have provided more depth of data especially in terms of lived experiences which are valuable particularly during qualitative analysis such as that used in this research.

Another concern in this study is that of the length of the study, and the scope of the intervention. In this regard, it is noted that it would have been necessary to run the intervention programme as part of this research project over a two-cycle period; and to include students from another academic department in the sample. This would have allowed for more generalisations to be extrapolated from the results of the study. This was not possible for two reasons: time constraints, and lack of human and financial resources.

As mentioned earlier, time is a major constraint because MEd students are expected to complete the qualification within two years from date of registration. This restrictive time frame does not allow for the implementation of more than one cycle of intervention on the same cohort of students. The human and financial resources needed for such a scope of intervention were not available. Within the framework of emancipatory action research, the second cycle of intervention continues even though the data that will emanate from the later cycle may not be included in this study. Praxis-based theories such as activity theory are oriented towards *transferability* of findings rather than generalizability of findings as discussed in chapter Three of this study.

5.6. Potential further research

From the analysis of the findings in this study, there is scope for some potential further research. The following serve as potential areas for valuable investigation:

- Implementation of a longitudinal action research intervention: such research would provide important data on the long-term potential impact of a collaborative, formative feedback intervention during essay-writing. The investigation could provide insights as to whether such an intervention equips the students with skills which could be used in other circumstances outside the essay-writing classroom.
- A multimodal text approach: Another potential area of further research could be a multimodal text investigation of the Department of Dental Sciences students' assignments. Some of the Dental Sciences students demonstrated a negative attitude towards essay-writing practices because they see themselves more as laboratory technicians than as writers. It would therefore be relevant and necessary to investigate

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how these students would respond to an intensive visual essay assignment. Such research could emerge from the use of Google Drive and E-portfolios that was started in February 2014.

5.7. Concluding remarks

The aim of this research was to investigate whether a collaborative approach in the design and dissemination of formative feedback between at-risk ECP and first-year students and their lecturers significantly improved their essay-writing practices. Research was couched within a qualitative cyclical action research methodology. Findings from the investigations were interpreted using activity theory. Results suggest that, when the lecturers and students collaborate with the literacies support services such as the writing centre and the library, there is a positive transformation in terms of the quality of the documentation and formative feedback support that the lecturers provide to the students.

The use of activity theory facilitated the examination of how at-risk students interacted with artefacts such as formative feedback and rubrics, and to identify some of the transformations that emerged as a result of such interaction. Activity theory provided a lens to interrogate the role of the lecturers and other members of the community, as well as the rules that govern the relations within the community during essay-writing.

From the analysis of the findings, the study concludes that a collaborative approach in the use of formative feedback during essay-writing has a positive influence on at-risk ECP and first-year students' perceptions and attitudes towards formative feedback in particular and essay-writing in general. Collaborative intervention during essay-writing influences the way lecturers perceive students and their writing challenges; as well as the way the students perceive the academic support provided by the lecturers and the literacies support staff. Even though this view is confirmed in some of the literature cited, this study goes a step further in indicating that disciplinary dynamics influences the outcomes of interventions of this nature.

This study provides substantial and verifiable insight into how such a collaborative intervention project could possibly improve the power dynamics between students, as subjects who are struggling to acquire a new discourse, and lecturers, who constitute members of the community, have control over such discourses. The research sheds light on how students and lecturers can engage in dialogue during essay-writing practices: collaboration can enhance students' attitudes towards essay-writing practices. This research has not been able to provide definitive evidence of how these students cope during essay-writing without the active collaboration of the lecturers and literacies support staff, but it does provide a strong motivation for further research on the issue.

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Appendices

Appendix A1: Pre-intervention focus group interview (coded)

Subject as seen by community	I don't expect too much because I think the school system failed most of them so I think that is why the extended program is very important to help them build that section of getting ready for tertiary education.
Perceptions of subject by community	For me the ECP is at least needed for the students to be able to express themselves in a manner that I can understand what message they are trying to relate. And then as the year progresses, they are supposed to be able to express themselves in a proper academic manner. This is because by the second half of the year, they would have acquired information to be able to express themselves adequately
Perceptions of subject by community	I expected them to do better than they are doing at the moment. My expectations where a little bit higher than that because, they finished matric which means something. And formally the quality of students we get here at **** is probably the bottom of the barrel that finished matric. They were not good performers in schools. You should have paid attention in school now you face the consequences
Perceptions of subject by community	When I started here, students were at least able to make their assignments seem like a story nowadays, you have to tell them how to write the story.
Perceptions of subject by community	I do see them struggle with basic, very basic language terms. Basic grammar; for me, English is not my first language, but these students struggle with very simple things. When it comes to assignment writing they cannot construct an assignment.
Descriptions of the subjects	For me I think they don't actually read, so there is no interest in reading something. They think that there are other means of getting the information. So instead of reading books if you are in school, "I'm sure there is a DVD that I can watch the movie or I don't have to read the book."
	We have to start telling them that they have to be able to write to be able to do research in the future. Hopefully that will also motivate them to start writing more or getting an interest
Subjects attitude towards writing as seen by community	I use to give them instructions, and the assignment that is submitted will be the exact same order of the assignment brief. There is no creativity there is no individual attempt.
Subject use as feedback as seen by community (can be seen as the use of tools)	I think it depends on students, emm certain students do take everything you give them and they improve on it and others just don't... I don't know if they just don't care or they don't just know at the time or some of them just give you the first draft that they have written and then they would turn that in as the final draft., after you have given them more than one draft feedback, they would just be hiding or whatever.
(can still be seen as the use of tools)	I agree with that, it depends on the student. Some students once you have given them that first feedback session, they ... the flow of their writing is better because they seem to have a better comprehension. Oh they are like I have this type of freedom with my writing but I need to stay within these lines. So they understand that and they actually carry on, on their own further than steps that you have given. And then you have other students where you must have 4 to 5 feedback sessions. And after 4 and 5, you explain the same thing 3 times, so the growth of

	the student is actually the 5th time which is not enough.
Use of rules to influence the way subjects use tools	I think there has to be some sought of marks attached to the efforts they have made. I think some of them have done it and I think it's a good system, by giving them marks for every draft that they hand in, and then if they do not hand in a draft, you deduct marks. Otherwise, I think it's motivational, the students, there is a lack of motivation on the students to perform.
Rules	if you haven't done improvements on that first feedback, then I don't give feedback on that first aspect, I carry on with the second aspect.
Use of tool: directive feedback; but used in the impact of lab support	My opinion on that is that it's the only way I think that they would learn is by pointing out these are the things that you are overlooking which are wrong. And they need to know that. So you need to point out the things that they are doing wrong because with the work that we do, sometimes we turn to work and you don't see the things that are incorrect.
Subject perceptions of the tool	I think they feel it's a personal thing when it's not. I mean, you point out a negative thing and they think you picking them on. But actually you are not picking on one person; you are actually well telling that one person that this thing is wrong, the whole class learns from it.
Use of tool: hieas feedback	I go through the entire document, err some of us only look at the technical aspects and sometimes we look at grammar and we identify all the grammatical errors and all the errors with regards to their writing skills. And then when we return it to them,
Tools: Use of blog for peer reviews	The other thing that I have tried is I have used a blog where I have pasted pictures with no names attached to it, then they give each other feedback, but you will not know which is your own work because you are not sure which one is yours. So they have to give themselves feedback, like peer review.
Some tools solicits positive self-motivation	That seems to have a positive spin. You know when people point out this has to be fixed. But the motivation does seem to be affected; the self-motivation.
Assumptions about the use of certain tools	Now I get very tough with them in terms of grammar and spelling simply because using computers these days, you have spell checks so there is actually no excuse for that. They are computer literate.
Use of specific tool (formative feedback) one-on-one sessions	I give one-on-one oral sessions. For first and second years, I have one-on-one oral sessions.
Perception of the subjects for the community	high school so in my opinion, they know nothing.
We can contrast this with what the subject say	They get lots of assistance from me.
Example of use of tool	like the other day, in some of the textbooks they write "we cure the denture" but when we lecture, we tell them that you polymerise the denture.
A need to reconceptualise the tools use	And I needed to explain to them even though in some textbooks, it's acceptable for that textbook to say they cured the denture for 10minutes, we explain it to you as the polymerisation process.
Another tool used: computer labs for whiting purposes	The extended programs do a lot of writing in classes. And we actually have specific classes that I sit in and we: I sit in, they sit in front of the computers and they are writing their assignments and they call us and we give direct feedback.
Object	Seems like it is working but on the other hand they have short term results, because the next assignment comes up and they have forgotten all what you have done. Their mistakes are the same and are repeated.

Tools: Interactive extra classes on if writing in computer labs	programs and the first year students and the extra classes that they have is focused on writing and assisting them with their assignments. I think it is definitely a positive thing because I think in some subjects, the extended programs students do better
Rules: ECP have more time	Also, because for some of the extended program students, we basically force them to submit work to the Writing Centre, whilst the first year students don't have that direct motivation; the ECP most often do better. So I'm not sure if lots of first year students don't hand in on time or don't hand in specific drafts.
Division of Labour:	the extended programs students are allocated more time in their time-table to consult with the Writing Centre, they tend to do better than the mainstream first year students.
Justification of how the tools and rules and community yield positive results	Sorry, just to build on that. I did the marks analysis of the first years together with the ECP; the class average of the ECP is always higher than the class average of the first years.
Use of rules and tools positive advantage for ECP but not so good for FYI	This is also because they have additional remedial subjects in their ECP program. To add to the Communication, they have to do Basic Academic Competence which is designed to support the students with issues around grammar etc. So they get the extra class, even though it is not Communication
Community views of participants (subject) view of tools	But I still feel that they have the opportunity to use the Writing Centre and I don't think they utilise the service as they should.
Adequacy of tools: The clean cry of more investment on resources	But I think there could also be a problem in the sense that some students need more feedback than others and you can only *fit in* so many people in a day, and so many people in a week and your feedback session is for example 50 minutes and you sit with that student for 10minutes and say just go and write a paragraph and what do you do if you don't see any improvements? That is also an issue where... so how many times do I need to see you? At some point in time the student needs to show some growth in their learning or understanding of the feedback.
Community measures subject's us of tools	And I have seen you submit how many times? So at some point, the student needs to understand that growth needs to be seen as a sign that feedback has been given to them.
Extra time to use the tool = better results	which is why the ones doing the extended program are doing better than the mainstream first year.
Some in the community request for draconian measures in the use of tools. Need to introduce text on student learning	And I understand that yes there is a program. I'm not sure whether the writing centre could set down a schedule. So obviously you would see that this group of students are not performing well. So make regular appointments. They should pre-set appointments with that student instead of expecting that student to come to you through his or her own accord. Force them to come to you especially if they are ECP and mainstream first year.
Community collaborating of integrated approved	But we do make it integrated for mainstream first years especially. I give the students the assignments and at the end I let the writing centre mark the writing skills elements of the essays. So I only mark content of the essay. So I let the writing centre in per say.
Misperceptions about the use of tools: visiting the writing centre on collecting formative feedback is not synonymous to passing the assignmrnt.	It's because they haven't used the facility.
Example of integrated work by the	if the writing centre makes it compulsory, and they report to us and say

community to support subjects	"this student is supposed to come for compulsory visits" and I am not seeing any improvements on my side then you are not seeing any improvements. Then that is how I can support the writing centre. But they need to schedule the student into their diary. And then I can support them in saying "I have received feedback that you are not attending consultation sessions which is compulsory.
	The Writing Centre was also given power last year to allocate a mark in your assignment that was marked by the writing centre for the language and referencing and all the academic references. That too counted for the mark set up. So if you know you didn't go, he knows he didn't sign you out,
Community seeking transformation with regards to investment on tools. Evidence of transformation and communal wellbeing	This is just the part we know which is 100 students. And 3 subjects or 4 subjects, 2 assignments each, is like a lot of work. It's not possible for one person. And especially when the department insists that there is one person there and proofs his standing and it helps for personal development while he is looking at other people as well.
Community advocate for use of a new tool: Single drive. An example of communal action: also consider the pros and cons of these 2 tools	I personally think that track changes are a bit more confusing. I recently was thought how to use Google drive and that is a lot more user friendly maybe to use for feedback. Because track changes has putting it on and putting it off, there is red stripes all over words sometimes it is difficult to get it away. Where I found that Google drive is much more user friendly with giving comments and feedback maybe we can look into that.
Supporting recognition of community collaboration	I started the portfolio last year and together with the writing centre. So, I coordinated the portfolio with support from the Writing Centre. The portfolios were also utilised in the Communication subject.
Student profile: gelling to know students (subject) by the community varied levels on competence by subject	Because this year what I have done is I have asked them to start their portfolio by telling me a little bit about themselves. Don't tell me I have brown eyes, green hair and I'm this tall, I need to know what type of person you are. So I like to work hard or I'm a bit lazy to start an assignment, those kinds of things.
This should also be contrasted within the background of the students by those who are not prone to the use of verbal expressions.	ok this person put some efforts into this half a page of writing. But then you get other people write 5 or 4 sentences. I am hard working. I will hand in my work on time. I don't really get the feel for that person because I need you to explain. You have just given me facts which you would have read anywhere.
Use of different tools to gauge student comprehension	I tried something last year which seemed to have worked better than this standing of the work. Because th ey were a bit slow at reading and writing and everybody started writing about it. Then they started a debate about it. So you got that part of the topic and the other the other part and they sat there, argued about it. They can talk about it.
The question is why?	And if that same topic came in the exam, they won't be able to express themselves.
Very important view from a member of the community regarding the subject competence	It's because they don't write, they don't write. They can talk yes but on paper, they cannot express themselves.
Community demonstrate awareness of other available tools	Something else that we are trying this year; we are trying a new method because students are not reading and writing: We went to a course that they talked about flipping the class room that we use

	technology, we give them like YouTube videos on a specific topic, they have to look at it, listen to it. Then give us feedback. So this is something new we are going to try this year so we will maybe give you feedback unless we have to make them get more interested. So I hope that works and that is a different method of getting them involved.

Appendix A2: Post-intervention focus group interview (coded)

Community working in an integrated way	I had a unique case in that I saw drafts in which there was feedback from two colleagues.
Subjects use of tools: based on their understanding + community reflecting on subjects and tools	I had a first draft which was marked by one lecturer and a final draft was marked by another lecturer and comparing the two drafts, it seemed as if the students would receive the feedback, then they will only choose what feedback to act on, the easy ones that they would change. That if it is too complicated, they change by saying "let me rather just remove that section.
Subjects do not use the tools	Some students, especially those whom I gave the feedback with them, they did very little changes as suggested in the feedback.
Subjects used the tools	However, there was one student who did very well, where she put into good use the feedback that I gave her. She's made corrections and has used some additional textbooks that I suggested.
Community realises that subjects face challenges using some tools	With regards to the content, with the other students, I feel they basically just went to the notes and where I said elaborate on that section,
Use of tools by subjects	It depends on individual students also because there are actually students who will take the feedback seriously and they would go back and come back with something complete.
Subject interacting with community	Some of them come to you and you have to explain the feedback that you gave them in writing.
Division of labour and rules	They typically say "what do you mean I must elaborate on? Give me an example of me elaborating or how I should elaborate".
Tools: knowledge of the use of tools (Community's views of subjects)	I do feel that they are struggling with paraphrasing the content. They struggle to take the information from the books and make it their own.
Division of labour between community and subjects	We can take the other example mentioned before, where she said to the student to explain, and the student asked her what she had to explain. Sometimes if I need something, I will just say ok then I put a bracket there and say grammar. Then I explain what grammar is wrong there for which they don't know the difference.
Strong claims in subjects ability by members of community	They cannot recognise the elements of grammar in their writings.
Subject use of tools & rules	For some reason I don't know why did they stop using spell check to fix their grammar? Because this is freely available on the computer. – is the rules made clear?
Rules: Community and understanding & rules	. It was about 5 o'clock in the evening when the assignment that I gave the students was due the next day. One student sms me to ask me what was the assignment about and the topic.
Rules and division of labour	5 o'clock on the eve of the evening when the assignment is due and the assignment was given to them 8 weeks before.
Subjects ignore the rules	But basically they would start with three days to the assignment, most students.
Community confirms subjects view of tools	And then they struggle with instructions too and reading the proper articles too. They struggle with stuff like that.
Division of labour & rules Example of contrastive views of the rules and division of labour between subjects and community	is that they think because they are handing in the draft I am going to correct their mistakes for them whereas I am reading to see if you have covered the entire topic required from the question that I have given you. I'm not reading it in order to correct your spelling mistakes. I don't see that as the purpose of reading a draft and you can tell me if I

	am wrong. The purpose of reading a draft is to check if you are covering the topic that was required not to fix your grammar or to fix your spelling.
	That's why the work has to go to the Writing Centre person, but the students by pass the literature person.
Rules and division of labour: subject vs the community	Actually, until recently I never took in drafts because there was a perception that if I gave you back feedback and you corrected it, the assignment is now a pass. So that is the perception. And I go to the writing specialists ask them to give you feedback not me. I want to see your thinking at the end of the day. But it got so bad now I said now, no no no let me take some and give feedback on the content.
Change of the rules: Community feel that there is a need to resist the rule and allocate marks for formative feedback	That means putting 15% of the total mark. So now there will be more effect because 15% of their total assignment mark is involved in it .
	I actually call it formative feedback. It has a section and I set the in it the formative feedback drafts.
Division of labour & rules as applied by	So they say ok and I explain it to them. This is the way, this is what I mean when I say I give you formative feedback. If I didn't get the draft obviously you didn't get feedback so that means you get naught for draft. So now they feel like "I have to do a draft." So firstly we get it, and then your reaction on my feedback is also a contribution in there. So 50% of it is you did the draft and I had the opportunity to read through it and give you feedback.
Rule: Community seeks clarity on the specific use of rules	So unless you put a value to it, they are not going to care about it. So a question comes up sometimes. For example we have a test this week. What % does it count for exams?
Community and rules	So I had to cancel the assignment because they had no concept of writing. And I don't want to put myself through that stress. So I cancelled the assignment. And I changed the assessment to something else.
Subject & tools	for me. I said as part of your introduction, introduce me to you. They would say "I am a girl; I have brown eyes and brown hair. I like these things so I like sports and that".
Use of toll by subject as seen by community	I don't think they can elaborate beyond that, in the sense I don't need to know if you are a girl or a boy. What are you, who are you? This is what I mean. Not my name is so and so, I am 18years old, I have brown eyes, that is not... I don't know whether they don't understand the words. It's the only way I can say it. I would understand it if I asked for a description. It's not what I see on the outside. It means tell me about yourself. So, a response like: "I am diligent and I do these kinds of things" are what I want to hear. "I am diligent, and at times, I do not stick to due dates"... That kind of stuff... so I can see their reasoning from the exercise. I can see ok, you don't really stick to due dates. So now I need to constantly check with you how far you are . with your time management. I want to see where their short comings are or where they are... you have to specifically say give me your strong points. You have to break it down in so many pieces, so that they can take in the small piece and then take their time and grow, then add another piece on top of that. They can't take this large chunk and break it down themselves
Strong view on subjects by community	I think maybe they are just weak with this. If you look at the matric results of the students we get, they are much poorer, they never future at the top third of their class in school.
Subjects views in the tools	I also do feel they are doing very practical fields so they feel like "why

	am I doing all this?" they do have that to a certain degree. So we have to keep reminding them that there needs to be proper communication between them and the dentists.
	So I think we can do writing and presenting for our students, even our students might be interested even for CPD purposes. One person will never write. We got smart ones in our days.
Community's views in subjects	My first thing is never to go backwards to make it easier on them. We got to insist to be done properly. Grammatically in every way, language has to be proper. There is no going backwards to say ok we will allow your sms language.
Change of rules by community	So it's basically a forced thing from my side. So I insist they do write because they won't engage with any of this information unless they are forced to. So if we don't do anything in between anytime they only have is when they engage with the information with the theory or
Subjects use of tools	Sentence structure is quiet a big problem and the work they get through Google drive, their sentences are incoherent. It creates a situation whereby we understand the content but we don't understand the sentence because it doesn't make sense at all.
Community's views on subjects needs	I think sometimes they struggle with expressing themselves also, the ones I give feedback to. It is good when they should but they don't use the proper words
Further re-enforcement of community's view of subject	They need to write one idea in one paragraph and they are still putting more than one idea in one paragraph.
	They still put in many ideas. And for them, very long sentences because they would say and, and because, and they could have actually just said those five lines which is just one sentence in three short sentences. And if you explain that to them, then they say "sorry, we never put so many sentences." Now you have to explain to them ok you have started with this idea, in the paragraph, so the paragraph is about this idea which you have explained.
Some members of the community, their views don't change	I should blame the schools, they have to start earlier. It is like how to train a wild animal. You do it for sometimes and when it's done, you got some trouble sorted. The twelve years of schooling and then now there is a way of changing things. It's not that easy.
Use of tools effectively requires time (Also see division of labour)	if I just look at more intermittent sessions with them. We do one-on-one. This needs to be explained but that is very time consuming depending on what level that the student is at. I think that one, this is x amount of sessions say 5 sessions and then I know the person can pass. But with the other one, it looks like I have to sit ten sessions because I need to figure out what don't you understand by the instruction "to elaborate".
See again rules and division of labour	I feel it's quite a lot of work. I feel for the Communication lecturer and the Writing Centre staff. I feel it's going to be very difficult getting through some of these students. If we had a language support person who understood the content requirement as well as the writing demands, I think it might be as well easier for the students. For the student to get an excellent mark in a theory essay, the write-up has to be very good and I know it will be difficult to achieve this, so ….
Community recognises the use of tools by subjects as insufficient (Short term objects as long term outcomes)	Another question that there is a problem is from our feedback, has the student learned anything? And the answer is definitely no. I can prove it to you; I can go outside grab an assignment of a first year student four years ago when the student is now B-Tech this year. His first assignment as a student now four years ago and what he is writing

	now. You compare their mistakes and comments ... they are exactly the same. I can prove it to you.
Managing short-term object and long term outcome	They are struggling with language ,so they are not taking in the content. You can also ask them to write a test on the assignment and they won't pass because they don't take it seriously.
Object and time	All the stuff we find is thought every year; you know what you thought them last year, now you teach them this year. You basically have to go through all of last year's stuff again and then do this year's stuff, because it is all missing.
Subjects views on tools as seen by community	In his mind he doesn't want to do this because he thinks it is bad. So that session also gets wasted anyway because he is not giving it his all.

Appendix B: Students' photovoice presentations (extracts)

Facilitator:

We are starting the photovoice presentation now ladies and gentlemen. I want to begin by thanking you once again for agreeing to be part of this photovoice presentation and to be part of the entire process of this research as participants. I am extremely grateful that you took out time to compile this photovoice presentation and that you allowed me the opportunity to read your essays and to follow you through your writing practices. I am very grateful. I want to first of all confirm with you on record that you all signed the consent form in my office. Your answer should indicate that we read through the consent form and you understand the contents of the consent form.

All:

Yes

Facilitator:

You must say it aloud so that the tape recorder will get it.

All:

Yes

Facilitator:

Excellent; now, just a quick reminder: You can say no I don't want to do this presentation anymore and you can pull out at any time. You do not have to use your names. For example, you do not have to say "I, Emmanuel is saying that..." alright? And you understand that I'm not going to pay you for participating in this research.

All:

Yes.

Thank you very much. I have given you pseudonyms which you are going to use in this presentation in order to protect your identity. This is the order; we are supposed to be 10 but one person pulled out so we are 9 of us. This is the order in which we are going to present: Divine, you will be the first student to present? So when you come up to present, I will refer to you as Divine, ok?

Divine:

Yes.

Facilitator:

Beryl, you will be the second presenter and we will call you Berryl throughout this presentation, ok?

Facilitator:

So you will all present in this order. Please speak aloud, be relaxed, be comfortable, and be free. Take your time; there is no wrong or right answer in this situation. After all of you have completed your photovoice presentations, I will ask a few questions to you as a group in order to clarify areas that I did not understand during your presentation. When responding to those questions, remember to use your pseudonym. Thank you very much. Let us begin with Divine.

Divine:

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I am 24 years old, male, and I live in Bellville South. Today I will be doing a presentation for you guys on the experiences I had on writing my essays in the first semester. When I first saw the essay instructions in Block 1, I felt devastated. If you have watched the movie, *Friday*, you will realize that Craig and Smokies are going down. That is how I felt when I saw the instructions on the essay. This is because, so many time I got confused and lost and so on just by reading the instructions because I feel it's too much for me to handle and while I am busy with the essay I feel almost like mike Tyson is knocking me out because I'm confused about what I am supposed to do even though I did read the instructions, it was still not that clear.

This picture shows that I sigh because I am not just in the mood for the essay as I said before in the beginning, I don't like doing essays. Honestly, I feel as I read through it, feels like I'm running into the battlefield like you saw in the first picture.

In the second picture, while almost at the end of the essay I feel like Michael Jackson moonwalking through that essay. And I feel much more comfortable once I have gotten feedback on my essay. And when the essay is complete, I feel like Michael Jordan doing his air slam! There, then I also enjoy a nice gatsby afterwards because gatsby rule everything around me. There is a nice gatsby there at the bottom, it's juicy. And that's more or less my feelings when it comes to writing essay this semester.

Thank you.

Beryl:

I'm not allowed to use my real names, so you can call me Beryl. I am a female, 21years old, and I live in Kuils River. My first picture basically reflects the comments I got while I was writing my essay because before I handed in for my first draft, I thought I was on the right track, I did everything correctly and the sound in the picture also represents my energy when I was working on my essay and how I felt about it.

My second picture shows me being in the dark not knowing where I have to go with my essay because, now I received a lot of comments, comments which were not detailed enough for me to improve on them properly so I felt a bit lost. So I did what I knew or what I could do.

In my third picture, the buildings represent all the big obstacles that I had to face throughout while I was writing my essay for my first and second drafts. And also, it shows that there are a lot of people like me, and that I am not alone with these problems and everyone has problems and so I have to overcome these big obstacles.

My fourth picture basically summarises all the frustrations of my essay writing in the first semester; especially with referencing because I still have troubles with it and throughout my essay writing. And the last picture to shows the support I received from my friends who were supporting me with my referencing and overall information. And those are my five pictures. Those are my opinions on how the feedback helped me with the essay writing.

Venter:

Good day class. You know my new name here is venter. I am from Windhoek in Namibia, but I stay in the Res in Tygerberg while studying here. I am 23 years old, and my first language is Afrikaans. Today I would like to do a picture presentation on how I used feedback during my essays in this semester. At first when I started with the essay, I wasn't quite sure of what they wanted. The instructions were unclear to me. It was just with the help of classmates that I was able to find out what exactly it was about. The first part of writing was a bit of a challenge for me. So when we got the essay, it was quite a lot of work to me and the due date was during the block exam. So I had my timing quite bad and I had to do the essay in the last minute. And so the exam pressure with the essay was like information overload down on me. During that time, especially the day before the due date, everything had gone off and it felt impossible for me to finish off because I also had a paper to study for and the essay to complete too the same day. I really felt like I was going under, like drowning. I am very bad with computers, so with all the pressure of completing the essay on time and I still had to work, my laptop was giving me problems, you know I felt like I will crash on the screen of my laptop. But when I went to the Writing Centre for assistance, they helped there to plan my essay and they advised me to consult with the lecturers for help on some of the things that I did not understand. After all of this, everything

started to fall in place and there was light at the end of the tunnel and I submitted the final draft of my essay on time, on the due date. Thank you

Ande:

Good afternoon Sir and good afternoon my classmates. I am using the name Ande today; and I am from Mitchelsplain. I am 26yrs old. I'm going to present my findings, and my thoughts and emotions during the essay writing process this semester using some pictures. Firstly, when we got the brief, I felt it was quite blurry to me ... and the instructions to me were like that picture: quite blurry, it's in the darkness; it's not showing its head. But then, I did some research, talked to some people and they explained to me what the brief is about, then things got a bit clearer. After the first draft, as you can see here, lots of comments, the comments were a bit unclear as well so I went to the Writing Centre and asked about comments and then he cleared some of the comments for me and some of the things that I did wrong I could fix it. And then that was directly after the first draft. And then the second draft, I got some more comments, and then I felt like I was battered by a wave as the comments just keep coming and I just felt miserable and unsure about myself. I didn't know where else to go. But by doing research, and going back to the Writing Centre many times to talk about the comments, things are clearing up. And then afterwards after I finished my drafts I reflected and I looked back at it looked to me like I could actually pass this. But I just needed to follow the right instructions and ya, that's it. Thank you.

Gail:

Today I will be showing you pictures of how I got the the final draft of my essay. Let me start about myself. I will be called Gail today, I am 27yrs old. First I felt overwhelmed by the essay. I felt like I'm not going to get it right. It always seemed like a big obstacle, like a big wave that I need to overcome. When I got the instructions it was like wave was hitting me, it was too much for me at that moment. As you can see here, the man in the picture is very frustrated and tired of the work he is doing. That's how I felt when I was half way through my essay. I just felt like I needed a break. I just need to get it out of the way because it was frustrating me a lot. And another thing is that I felt tired and drenched out; as you can see, I was passed out on my papers as I was exhausted like my essay took all of my energy out of me. And I was working hard to get the essay done. And I just felt exhausted. However, after I got some comments on my paper and some clear instructions from the Writing Centre, I was able to keep clam and focus again. And then I could do what was expected of me. At the beginning I was overwhelmed by all the instructions and I just felt I didn't know what was expected of me. I was tired because I was drained. But after receiving the instructions from the Writing Centre, and talking to my other lecturers, I was able to finish my essay and I'm relieved. I was able to complete it and my work is done.

Thank you very much.

Laiba:

Good afternoon everyone, today I'm going to be doing a presentation on my essay writing and on how I felt about the whole thing. I am 19yrs old and you can call me Laiba today.

At first, whenever I am given an essay, I feel like my whole body goes into shock. It's almost like you don't know what you have to do. It's always like the feeling that you get when you have to tackle the something big and scary; just that shock. And then while I was doing my essay, I felt stressed and pressured, this particular essay was very stressful and I felt too much pressure. I felt angry and lost at the beginning too; I had no clue as to what was being expected from me in this essay. I felt threaten; I didn't think that I could complete the task given to me. But after we were told by Mr Steyn to go to the Writing Centre when we have difficulties writing our essays, I visited the Writing Centre and consulted few other lecturers. I know had the courage to tackle the essay on my own. I felt that the feedback they gave me really helped me a lot. At the beginning, I felt stressed and under pressure as you can see on the pictures because I was scared of consulting with the lecturers. However, I felt a lot better after that. After the second draft, I felt an incredible feeling of relieve. And after the process I overcame many obstacles even with other subjects, and saw that it wasn't that hard as I first thought. I'm sure the second essay will go much better. Thank you

Appendix C1: Communication learner guide (extracts)

Table of Contents

1. Introduction/Welcome

Welcome to the English Communication Skills class! The demands of completing a university degree are, in many ways, very different to what you have been exposed to in your previous schools. For starters, the main language of instruction in the university is English and this might cause extra challenges for students who studied English as an additional language in school. This subject will provide you with an opportunity to improve your communication and presentation skills. Furthermore, it will help develop proficiency in academic literacy.

Effective communication skills are critical to success in any career. The ability to interact and communicate well is essential to your job as a Dental Technician. Conversely, Dental Practitioners who lack vital interpersonal and communication skills will be less able to interact with customers, to learn, train and develop theirs and their colleagues' knowledge to meet the demands of this profession.

This course does not focus on the rudiments of English grammar, pronunciations or history. Rather, it focuses on the use of English to communicate within a specific discipline and within a larger community. It encourages you to take personal responsibility for working to enlarge your general and discipline-related vocabulary, at the same time improving your ability to use language in ways that will help you to meet the language requirements of the academic programme.

Therefore, English Communication is primarily a practical course – the more you practice these communication skills the more competent you will become.

2. Subject Module/Specification

2.1. Purpose, structure and learning outcomes

This module offers an introductory study into English Communication and should enable you to do the following:

o apply your theoretical and practical knowledge of the basic principles of communication

o recognize the interrelatedness of aspects such as communication systems, hierarchical structures, forms of address and means of communication in organizational communication

o be aware of meeting procedure and compile the required correspondence

o apply the requirements of effective report writing

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o   ensure readability of written work by identifying and editing errors of style, punctuation, language content and layout

o   apply the requirements of effective oral presentations

o   practise correct language usage by focusing on concise writing, subjective versus objective writing, summary writing, etc.

o   practise academic reading and writing by focusing on aspects such as the writing process, academic reading strategies as well as in-text and end-of-text referencing.

This subject offers a good foundation for the reading and writing requirements in your content subjects.

2.2.   Module structure

New material will be presented by means of lectures and facilitation sessions that will be followed by discussions and question sessions. Where appropriate, videos will be shown and guest speakers will be invited. Besides the discussion of case studies, use will also be made of tutorials and group discussions. You will need to do considerable research in the library, especially with regard to the completion of assignments, projects and preparation for oral assessments.

The medium of instruction is English. However, you are welcome to approach your lecturer for assistance with any language difficulty.

In addition, you are encouraged to visit the Writing Centre with drafts of your assignments before submitting the final copy to any of the other subject lecturers. The teaching staff at the Writing Centre will always be willing and ready to assist students.

2.3.   Overview of subject outcomes and content

2.3.1. Semester 1

UNIT	TOPIC (Learning Objectives)	ACADEMIC WEEKS	DATES

	Academic Reading and Writing	Teaching Week 1	03 Feb - 07 Feb

	Students should be able to demonstrate an understanding an application of the following:
	
	• The writing process
	    ♦ planning an outline,
	    ♦ analysing the topic
	    ♦ using prior knowledge
	    ♦ brainstorming and mind mapping
	• Reading strategies
	    ♦ skimming
	    ♦ scanning
	    ♦ previewing		

1	**Academic Reading and Writing**
	
	• Definition of plagiarism
	• Types of plagiarisms
	• The place of referencing in HE & CPUT's policy on plagiarism
	• Harvard referencing
	• Referencing (in-text)
	
	    ♦ Single author
	    ♦ Two authors
	    ♦ Three or more authors
	    ♦ The case of the internet
	    ♦ Punctuation
	    ♦ Use of brackets
	    ♦ Direct & indirect quotations
	    ♦ Voice and interpretation of quotations
	    ♦ Context and other uses of quotations
		Teaching Week 2	10 Feb – 14 Feb

	Academic Reading and Writing • Referencing (end-of-text)	Teaching Week 3	17 Feb – 21 Feb

	• Books • Journals • Online sources • Newspapers • Class notes • Periodicals etc • Punctuation		

	Academic Reading and Writing
	
	• Text structure (introduction & assignment body)
	    • Qualities of an introduction
	    • Thesis
	    • Unity
	    • Tense
	    • Qualities of a paragraph
	    • Topic sentence
	    • Supporting sentences
	    • Unity and coherence
		Teaching Week 4	**24 Feb – 28 Feb**

	Academic Reading and Writing
	
	• Text structure (conclusion)
	    • Qualities of a conclusion
	    • Summation
	    • Opinion
	    • Tense
		Teaching Week 5	**03 Mar – 07 Mar**

	Academic Reading and Writing
	
	• Text structure (critical reading & writing)
	    • Voice and argument
	    • Logical development of ideas
	    • Note taking and revision
	    • The use of MS Word Track changes
		Teaching Week 6	**10 Mar – 14 Mar**

Appendix C2: Learning materials used during essay-writing practice (extracts)

The Writing Center

Verb Tenses

What this handout is about

These three verb tenses account for approximately 80% of the verb tense use in academic writing. This handout will help you understand how present simple, past simple, and present perfect verb tenses are used in academic writing.

Present Simple Tense

The **present simple** tense is the basic tense of most academic writing. Use this as your first choice unless you have a good reason to use another tense. Specifically, the present simple is used:

To "frame" your paper: in your introduction, the present simple tense describes what we *already know* about the topic; in the conclusion, it says what we *now know* about the topic and what further research *is still needed*. To make general statements, conclusions, or interpretations about previous research or data, focusing on what is known *now* (*The data suggest ... The research shows ...*). To cite a previous study or finding without mentioning the researcher in the sentence:

*The dinoflagellate's TFVCs **require** an unidentified substance in fresh fish excreta*

(Environmental Science)[1]

To introduce evidence or support in the structure: *There is evidence that ...* To show strong agreement with a conclusion or theory from a previous paper (*Smith suggests that ...*), but not specific findings or data (use the past simple)

Past Simple Tense

Past simple tense is used for two main functions in most academic fields: To introduce other people's research into your text when you are describing a specific study, usually carried out by named researcher. The research often provides an example that supports a general statement or a finding in your research. Although it is possible to use the past tense to distance yourself from a study's findings, this appears to be rare, at least in scientific writing.[2] *...customers obviously want to be treated at least as well on fishing vessels as they are by other recreation businesses.* [General claim]

*De Young (1987) **found** the quality of service to be more important than catching fish in attracting repeat customers.* [Specific supporting evidence] (Marine Science) To describe the methods and data of your completed experiment. However, look at examples of the Methods and Results sections in journals in your fields to check that this is good advice for you to follow. In many fields, the passive voice is most usual in methods sections, although the active voice may be possible.

*We **conducted** a secondary data analysis ...* (Public Health) *Descriptional statistical tests and t-student test **were used** for statistical analysis.* (Medicine) *The control group of students **took** the course previously ...* (Education)

Present Perfect Tense

The **present perfect** is mostly used for referring to previous research in the field or to your own previous findings. Since the present perfect is a *present* tense, it implies that the result is still true and relevant today. The subject of active present perfect verbs is often general: *Researchers have found, Studies have suggested.* The present simple could also be used here, but the present perfect focuses more on *what has been done* than on *what is known to be true now* (present simple). In the following example, there are two opposite findings, so neither is the accepted state of knowledge: *Some studies **have shown** that girls have significantly higher fears than boys after trauma (Pfefferbaum et al., 1999; Pine &; Cohen, 2002; Shaw, 2003). Other studies **have found** no gender differences (Rahav &; Ronen, 1994).* (Psychology) A new topic can be introduced with this structure:

There have been several investigations into ... ⸢ The present perfect forms a connection between the past (previous research) and the present (your study). So, you say what *has been* found and then how you will contribute to the field. This is also useful when you want to point out a gap in the existing research. *More recently, advances **have been made** using computational hydrodynamics to study the evolution of SNRs in multidimensions ...(citation) ...* [previous research]

*However, a similar problem **exists** in the study of SNR dynamics.* [gap] (Astrophysics)

Appendix C3: Assignment brief and rubric

TERM1 ESSAY: FABRICATION OF DENTURES

INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH BASED REFLECTIVE ESSAY

SUBMISSION DATES:
FIRST DRAFT SUBMISSION: FRIDAY 14TH MARCH 2014 @11am prompt
RETURN DRAFTS TO STUDENTS: TUSDAY 18TH MARCH 2014 @ 13:45
FINAL SUBMISSION: THURSDAY 27th MARCH 2014

NB: late submissions will be penalised

TOPIC BRIEF: Consider the processes in the fabrication of dentures that you are currently studying in Oral Anatomy. Focus on the first two processes involved in the fabrication of dentures.

Based on the above statement, you are required to write a research based reflective essay on the topic **preliminary processes in the fabrication of dentures**. Your assignment should include, but not be limited to the following aspects related to the fabrication of dentures:

❖ Identify and outline the first two processes in the fabrication of dentures;
❖ Determine and discuss the protocol observed by the dental technician during the completion of these two processes;
❖ Explain briefly the skills and knowledge that are needed in order to meet the challenges of completing the first two processes;

NB: USE THE MARKING GRID BELOW AS A GUIDELINE WHEN REVISING YOUR ESSAY.

Rubric: Marked by Percentage range

Criteria	Novice	Competent	Proficient
Introduction (10%)	0 – 4% No or poor summary of essential message / key points of assignment. Lack of logical development of key point. Does not captivate the readers' interest. Does not present a background to the topic.	5 – 7% An attempt to summarise essential message / key points of assignment. A logical breakdown of the essay. There is an attempt to captivate the reader's attention through the use of some background information.	8 – 10% Summary of essential message / key points of assignment presented. Logical breakdown and presentation of key points of assignment in a summary format. Excellent attempt to captivate the reader's attention through the use of some background information.
Main Discussion (40%)	0 – 17% Poor understanding of the topic: Processes in the fabrication of dentures. Weak analysis of the protocol during the fabrication of the dentures and not sufficient identification and explanation of the skills needed to complete those processes. Illogical structuring and linking of discussion points.	18 – 29% Some understanding of the topic: processes in the fabrication of dentures. Good (but with some lapses) analysis of protocol governing the dental technician during the fabrication of the dentures and sufficient identification and explanation of the skills needed to complete those processes. Logical structuring and linking of discussion points.	30 – 40% Excellent understanding of the topic: fabrication of dentures. Detailed analysis of protocol governing the technician during the fabrication of the dentures, and clear and concise identification and explanation of the skills needed to complete those processes. Logical structuring and linking of discussion points.
Language Correctness (20%)	0 – 8% Poor written communication skills: grammar, spelling, writing style. Information is not well structured and not easy to read. Weak command of grammar and vocabulary. Lacks ability to summarise and present relevant information in	9 – 15% Average written communication skills: grammar, spelling, writing style. Information is structured with some lapses and not always easy to read. Moderate command of grammar and vocabulary. Ability to summarise and present relevant information in your own	16 – 20% Excellent written communication skills: grammar, spelling, writing style. Information is well structured and easy to read. Good command of grammar and vocabulary. Ability to summarise and present relevant information in your own words and avoid

	0 – 4%	5 – 7%	8 – 10%
	your own words and avoid over-use of direct quotations from text.	words and avoid over-use of direct quotations from text.	over-use of direct quotations from text.
	No evidence of assistance obtained from writing centre (where needed).	Some evidence of assistance obtained from writing centre (where needed).	Evidence of assistance obtained from writing centre (where needed).
Technical Layout (10%)	Poor formatting used in terms of margins, headings, etc. Incorrect line spacing and wrong fonts used. Student did not follow the instructions regarding formatting provided in the assignment brief.	Good formatting used in terms of margins, headings, etc.; but with a few mistakes. Correct line spacing and right fonts used. Student followed, with some difficulties identified, the instructions regarding formatting provided in the assignment brief.	Excellent formatting used in terms of margins, headings, etc.; with no mistakes. Correct line spacing and right fonts used. Student followed diligently the instructions regarding formatting provided in the assignment brief.
Conclusion (10%)	Does not restate the aims of the essay. Does not summarise the key points discussed in the body. Does not provide a take home message.	Attempts to restate the aims of the essay with some difficulty. Provides a summary of a few of the key points discussed in the body. Attempts to provide a take home message.	Restates the aims of the essay in an excellent and confident manner. Provides a summary of the key points discussed in the body. Provides a take home message.
Quality of References (10%)	Less than three (2) references, excluding prescribed text. Incorrect use of the Harvard reference system in assignment text. No or poorly compiled reference list at end of text. Lacks research skills – the breath and quality of sources used by the student.	Less than FIVE (4) references, excluding prescribed text. Correct use of the Harvard reference system in assignment text (with few errors). Reference list at end of text (with few errors). Research skills – the breath and quality of sources used by the student.	At least FIVE (5) references, excluding prescribed text. Correct use of the Harvard reference system in assignment text. Reference list at end of text with no errors. Excellent research skills – the breath and quality of sources used by the student.

Special instructions

1. Formatting:

Follow the formatting instructions below carefully:

- Font size 12 for text
- Font size 14 bold for main headings
- Font size 12 bold for sub headings
- Fully justify text
- 1.5' line spacing
- Standard margins

2. Declaration:

Attach a declaration page indicating that the essay is your own original work and that you have not plagiarised within it. Use the declaration page provided in the Z drive.

3. Presentation:

Drop the final essay in the correct drop box next to the Archive (opposite the Library entrance). The drop box will be locked at 8:30 on the due date and re-opened the following morning at 08:30 for late assessment tasks.

Complete the essay and print on A4 paper, and bound with one staple at the top left hand corner.

Appendix D: Excerpts from students' essays with formative feedback
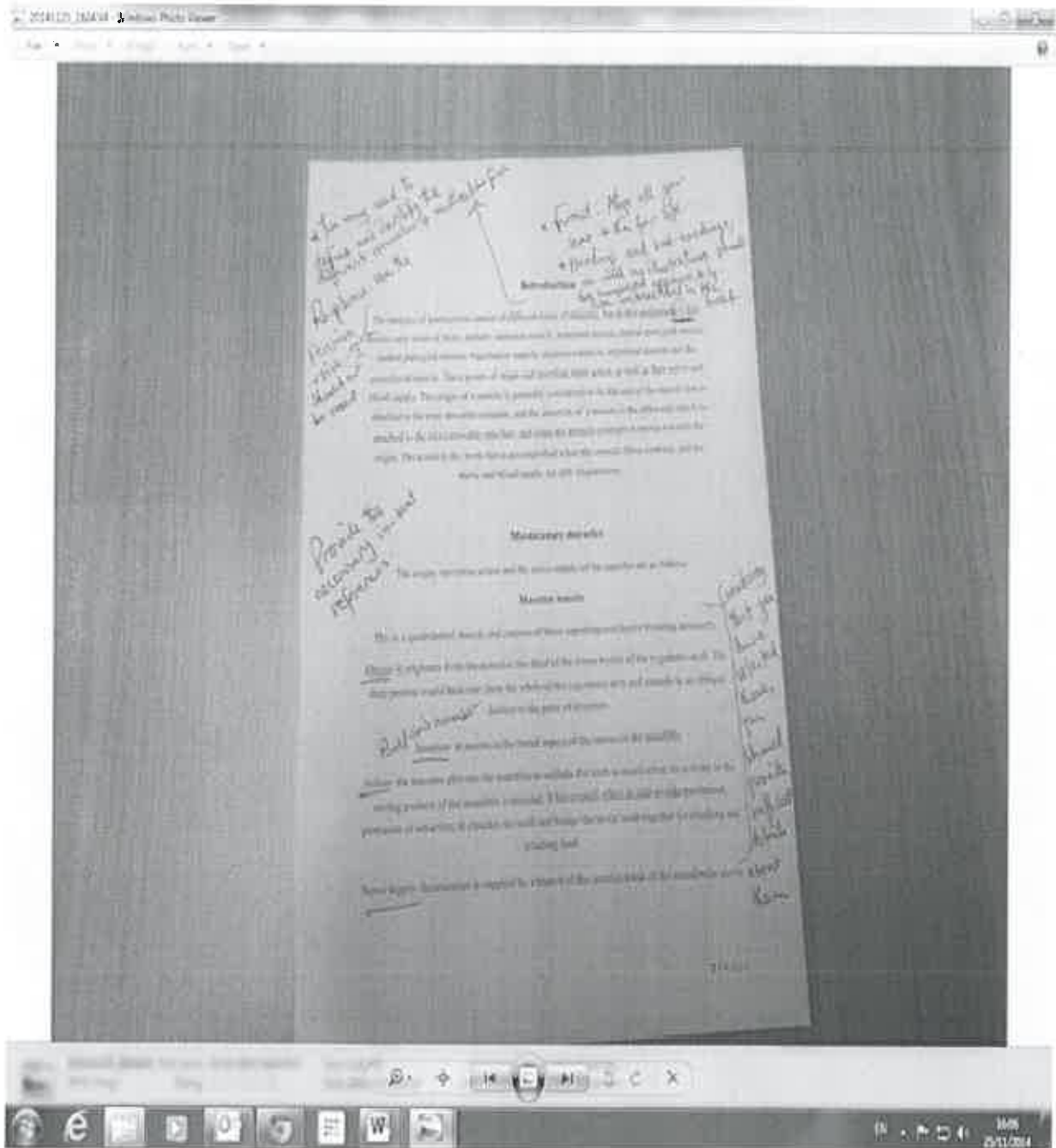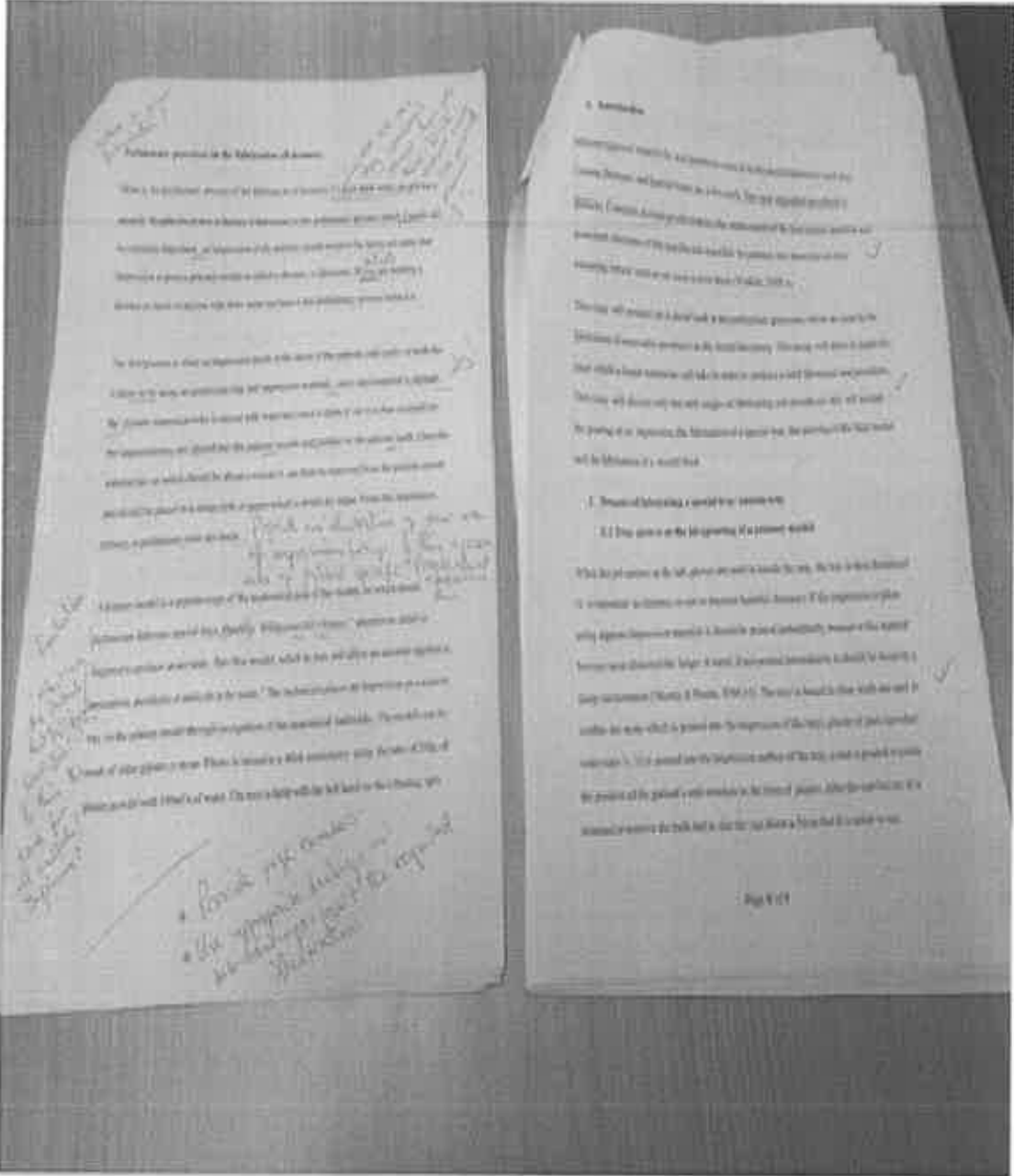
Appendix E1: Copy of Consent form

Cape Peninsula University of Technology

21 January 2014.

Consent Form

(Participating student)

I ....volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Mr. Emmanuel Esambe from the Department of Research, Faculty of Education and Social Sciences of Cape Peninsula University of Technology. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the use of formative feedback during essay writing practices for ECP and first year students. I will be one of approximately 10 students who will be participating in this research. The topic of the research is: **"Formative feedback and essay writing practices for at-risk students".**

My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one on my campus will be told.

I understand that most of the participants will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the study, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end my participation in the study.

Participation involves contributing during essay writing activities to be facilitated by Mr. Esambe or another person representing him; and conducting a photo-voice presentation. I also hereby give my consent for him to use drafts of my essays or video of me during the photo-voice presentation provided that my identity will not be disclosed to any third party. Should there be a need for that, my consent would be sort for before this is done.

1

I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this study, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

Faculty and administrators from my campus (except the research participants) will neither be present during the presentations nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.

I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty Research Committee (FRC), Faculty Ethics Committee (FEC) and the Higher Degree Committee (HDC) of CPUT. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the FEC may be contacted.

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I have been given a copy of this consent form.

_____

My Signature and date (Jan 22, 2014)

_____

Signature and printed name of the researcher

Emmanuel Esambe

Email: esambee@cput.ac.za

Tel: 021 959 5586

Cape Peninsula
University of Technolog

21 January 2014.

Consent Form
(Participating content subject lecturer)

I ....volunteer to participate in the research project conducted by Mr. Emmanuel Esambe from the Department of Research, Faculty of Education and Social Sciences of Cape Peninsula University of Technology. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the use of formative feedback during essay writing practices for ECP and first year students. I will be one of three lecturers and ten students who will be participating in this research. The topic of the research is: **"Formative feedback and essay writing practices for at-risk students"**.

My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one on my campus will be told.

I understand that most of the participants will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the study, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end my participation in the study.

Participation involves being part of a focus group interview to be facilitated by Mr. Esambe or another person representing him; and providing formative feedback to students' essay drafts where needed. I also hereby give my consent for him to use my formative feedback provided to ECP and first year students' essays in the study provided that my identity will not be disclosed to any third party. Should there be a need for that, my consent would be sort for before this is done.

I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this study, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
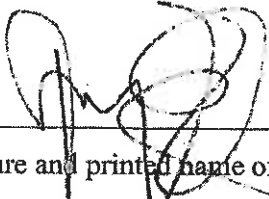
Faculty and administrators from my campus (except the research participants) will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.

I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty Research Committee (FRC), Faculty Ethics Committee (FEC) and the Higher Degree Committee (HDC) of CPUT. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the FEC may be contacted.

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I have been given a copy of this consent form.

My Signature and date (Jan 2014)

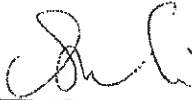Signature and printed name of the researcher
Emmanuel Esambe
Email: esambee@cput.ac.za

Tel: 021 959 5586

Appendix E2: Ethics approval (Extracts)

Please note that in signing this form, supervisors are indicating that they are satisfied that the ethical issues raised by this work have been adequately identified and that the proposal includes appropriate plans for their effective management.

Faculty Research Ethics Committee comments:

EFEC unconditionally grants ethics clearance to the study titled "Formative feedback and essay writing
practices for at-risk students". The certificate is valid for two years from the date of issue.

Approved	Referred back	Approved subject to adaptations	Chairperson Cina Mosito, PhD		Date: 15/10/2013

Approval Certificate/Reference: EFEC 1-10/2013

Emmanuel Ekale
Esambe
25 Lawrence Road,
Maitland, 7405
Cape Town.

30 April 2014.

To: Prof. Chetty
Head of Research and Postgraduate
Faculty of Education and Social Science

MEd Research Study with   / students as respondents

Candidate: Emmanuel Ekale Esambe   **Student number:** 212080628

Title: Formative feedback and essay writing practices for at-risk students

I will conduct my MEd research at the   where my respondents will be students. I have obtained ethics clearance from the Faculty of Education and Social Science where I am registered to complete my studies. Further consent to interview the respondents will be obtained from each participating student individually in writing before the interviews.

Yours Sincerely,

E. Esambe

Appendix E3: Permission from HoD (Extracts)

Student No: 212080628

Ref: **Ref: EFEC 1-10/2013**

Dear Mr Esambe,

Proposed M.Ed study at

Your application to this department to use the Department of Dental Sciences as a study site has reference.

Your study titled **"Formative feedback and essay writing practices for at-risk students"** is of great relevance to the Academic Literacy sector and to the Department. Your application has been studied and departmental permission is hereby granted to collect data from our ECP and first year students', as well as participating lecturers' essay writing activities on the following conditions:

1. Participation is voluntary and informed consent will be obtained
2. There will be no unauthorised disruption of learning programme
3. You observe all the required conditions provided in your Faculty Research and Ethics Committee approval

We wish you well on your post-graduate endeavour.

Kind regards,