Pondering a process approach to writing: an action research project

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At Peninsula Technikon in Bellville, Communication Skills is a first year subject situated in Semester 1 of the three-year Chemical Engineering and Analytical Chemistry National Diploma courses. While part of the focus of the subject is, indeed, communication skills for the workplace, the subject also focuses on developing students' academic literacy.

In Semester 1 of 2000, attempts to improve students' academic writing through a process approach (i.e. multiple drafts with feedback on each) as part of the (Communication Skills subject) did not yield convincing results, in the opinion of the Communication Skills lecturer (J.Wright).

In Semester 2 of the same year, the Communication Skills lecturer (J. Wright), in conjunction with the Chemical Engineering lecturer (G. Hangone), conducted preliminary research in this area, focusing on only the Chemical Engineering group in their CPI subject (with the focus on learning about chemical process industries). The purpose of the 2000 study was to explore the effectiveness of a joint attempt to improve the students' results through a process approach to the writing of a Chemical Engineering assignment. It was hoped that there would be an improvement, not only of the students' understanding of the key concepts of the subject for that assignment but in the implementation of the academic literacy skills that had been taught in the Communication Skills subject.

In the study the intention was to:

- consider the extent to which students used and valued the opportunities presented by a process writing approach;
- compare the quality of students' efforts in two drafts of the assignment; and
- try to establish reasons for any differences in quality that might be noted.

It was hoped that the findings of this study would assist in deciding whether or not to implement a process approach to the writing of student assignments more widely, not only in the Chemical Engineering Department, but also in other departments of the Faculty of Science.

In Semester 1 of 2001, this research continued, this time involving students studying Analytical Chemistry. The Analytical Chemistry lecturer (A. Solomons) and the Communication Skills lecturer (J. Wright) gave a joint assignment. The intention was to explore whether the 2001 findings confirmed the findings from the 2000 research. An additional intention was to pay more attention to student feedback on the process, an aspect not deeply explored in the 2000 study. This feedback would take the form of responses to questionnaires and tape-recorded focus-group discussions.

In this article, the authors will describe the research process, outline the key findings and reflections on what has been learned, as well as indicate some future plans.