

Student perspectives on the impact of embedding academic literacy activities in distance learning study material

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Academic literacy is widely considered to be central to academic knowledge building and success. However, it is recognised that students increasingly come to higher education lacking confidence in their academic literacy skills and consequently, unprepared for the demands of their study. To address this gap, universities in the UK offer students self-standing or embedded academic literacy courses. Several studies have previously reported benefits of embedded academic literacy for students in disciplines such as sociology and engineering. However, these studies are limited to face-to-face learning contexts; therefore, there is no such research in a distance learning context. This study, a collaboration between an academic literacy specialist and an early childhood studies academic, sought to explore the perspectives of first- and second-year early childhood studies distance education students on the effect of embedded academic literacy activities in their course materials. Following a mixed methods approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews of students ($N = 11$) at three time points (33 interviews) and surveys at the end of the course ($N = 69$). The findings reveal that the students were consistently engaged in their academic literacy-focused work and that this engagement was enhanced by the activities being integrated in the materials, easily accessible, and drawn from the core subject matter. Furthermore, the students reflected that the embedding approach positively contributed to their self-confidence as academic writers. The implications of these findings for disciplinary writing pedagogy and the embedding academic literacy in disciplines are discussed in the context of other research, together with suggestions for future course/curriculum design.

Keywords: academic literacies; early childhood studies; academic writing; distance education; embedding academic literacy.

1. Introduction

Academic literacy is widely considered to be central to knowledge building and success (Coffin & Donohue, 2014; Snow, 2010; Woodward-Kron, 2002). However, it is a complex concept that is difficult to define because its meaning and practices depend on the view of the language and

literacies that one adopts (e.g., see Coffin & Donohue, 2012; Wingate & Tribble, 2012). This paper uses Wingate's (2018) definition of academic literacy as 'the ability to communicate competently in an academic discourse community; this encompasses reading, evaluating information, as well as presenting, debating and creating knowledge through both speaking and writing' (p. 350). Broadening the conceptualisation of academic literacy beyond the confines of a focus on academic writing immediately shifts its development as being appropriate for all students rather than a minority, and consequently its support as concerning all 'expert members of the discourse community' (Wingate 2018, p. 350).

The support of academic literacy has become even more relevant in the context of higher education in the United Kingdom today. Many more nontraditional students who are often not fully prepared for the demands of their studies are now entering Higher Education (Murray & Nallaya, 2016), especially, in a context where academic writing persists as the main mode of assessment (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Evidence also indicates that, despite academic literacy posing challenges to an increasing number of students, the provision of appropriate support continues to be ignored by institutions (Cummins, 2014) or peripheral to their main studies and generally remedial in nature (Wingate, 2006).

This paper reports on the provision of specific academic literacy support that students received as part of a new Early Childhood degree programme at a UK distance learning university. The students in the programme are part-time, completing their studies along with ongoing work and family commitments. Within the range of support that these students request, both at the beginning and during their studies, they often identify the development of their academic literacy as a high priority. This could be attributed to their resuming studies a considerable number of years after completing compulsory schooling and possibly to their having few formal qualifications as there are no educational entry requirements to study the degree.

In addition to the study issues that students' circumstances can raise, the pedagogic nature of the distance learning model itself can prompt students to highlight their need for academic literacy support (Lea, 2004). The programme is delivered online through written study materials which students complete week-by-week. Each student has a tutor to support their learning and help them prepare for assignments through online tutorials and exchanges on a group forum. This tutor also marks and provides written feedback online for their submitted work. Consequently, in such a distance learning environment, 'Where all the teaching and all the communication is in writing, or in multimodal texts of one form or another, and where there is no face-to-face communication for participants, issues of literacy, language, and learning are inevitably pertinent to the teaching and learning context' (Lea, 2004, p. 745).

To respond to these inherent issues, the team that wrote and designed two new courses within the degree programme decided to embed online activities that focused on the development of academic literacy skills in the study materials. This approach follows a growing call within the field of curriculum design over the past two decades for such embedding to be used and the consequent integrated teaching of academic literacy and subject knowledge to be developed (Macnaught, Bassett, van der Ham, Milne, & Jenkin, 2022; Murray & Nallaya, 2016; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011). Following Wingate et al. (2011), we define embedding as fully integrating academic literacy with the discipline's curriculum (early childhood studies, in this case) taught by subject lecturers. From a theoretical perspective, such integration acknowledges the disciplinary variation associated with academic language practices (Haneda, 2014), meaning that aspects of academic literacy in early childhood studies should be recognised as distinct and consequently requiring support through integrated teaching alongside the main subject material (Wingate et al., 2011, Wingate & Tribble, 2012). Such an integrated approach is seen to allow students not only to 'gain valuable academic skill development while simultaneously learning about discipline content ...', but also to encourage 'an in-discipline vocabulary which will provide extended discourse' (Kennelly, Maldoni & Davies, 2010, p. 63).

Before the redesign of these two courses, the teaching of academic literacy for the early childhood students was decontextualised and separated from the subject teaching materials. This approach emulated traditional practices in many western universities that provided ‘English for Academic Purposes’ classes, study skills, or general cross-disciplinary courses as a ‘bolt-on approach’ (Lea & Street, 1998; Wingate, 2018). This approach oversimplifies the complex nature of the educational experience by suggesting that ‘there is a difference between studying successfully and learning, and that, if certain techniques are acquired, students can study successfully without deep engagement with the subject’ (Wingate, 2006, p. 459). In contrast, by using a model of embedding academic literacy in the materials, the two new courses aimed to provide students with a more integrated learning experience which highlighted ‘the relationship between language, text and context’ (Coffin & Donohue, 2012, p. 650).

Although the benefit of embedding academic literacy teaching has been widely discussed in the literature (Hyland, 2000; Nesi & Gardner, 2006; North, 2005; Wingate et al., 2011), there appears to have been very few studies which have reported on the impact of such an approach (Prymachuk, Gill, Wood, Ollevent & Keeley, 2012). Where research has taken place, generally in face-to-face rather than distance learning environments (Lea, 2004), positive outcomes for students in terms of supporting their academic literacy have been highlighted in a wide range of subjects including architecture, sociology, arts and teacher education, electrical engineering, business studies, and applied linguistics (see Baik & Greig, 2009; Black & Rechter, 2013; Macnaught et al., 2022; Murray & Nallaya, 2016; Skinner & Mort, 2009; Veitch, Johnson, & Mansfield, 2016; Wingate et al., 2011). However, there is considerable variation between these studies in the way academic literacy teaching was integrated into the subject curriculum. For example, Black and Rechter (2013) reported on the impact of an online course that ran alongside the students’ main course; Evans et al. (2009) focused on language support via open workshops and targeted individual sessions for selected students; and Skinner and Mort (2009) studied the effects of courses that were integrated into a course schedule but only for certain students flagged by an initial assessment of their academic literacy level.

Despite such evident disparities, some commonalities in the approaches are apparent. Academic literacy activities that draw on the focus subject matter and which are conceived collaboratively by subject and literacy specialists have been identified in previous studies as being a key component of an embedding approach (Black & Rechter, 2013; Gunn, Hearne & Sibthorpe, 2011; Skinner & Mort, 2009). Furthermore, Black and Rechter (2013) have suggested that the effectiveness of embedded academic literacy activities depends on their being readily accessible to students. Several studies also reiterate the importance of completing academic literacy activities as a piece of assessment (Skinner & Mort, 2009), or at least included in the learning outcomes of the course (Murray & Nallaya, 2016).

These common principles informed the design of the academic literacy activities that are the focus of this study. The subject academics worked in collaboration with an academic literacy specialist to produce two compulsory online modules, the design of which incorporated academic literacy activities that were readily accessible to students every week (see [Appendix 1](#) for examples). Based on student needs and assignment requirements, both subject academics and the academic literacy specialist identified the required academic literacy components, such as summarising, paraphrasing and citing sources, and cowrote academic literacy activities. These activities used content from subject-specific study materials, allowing students to practise academic literacy skills by drawing on familiar and relevant topics. In addition, the assignments’ requirements during each module were aligned with the progression of the elements of academic literacy being taught. Consequently, by following these principles of embedding, the subject academics and the academic literacy specialist were aiming to make the new module materials, including assignments, more responsive to the range of attributes and academic literacy skills that each group of students need to succeed in their study (Evans et al., 2009). The assignments were marked by the subject tutors paying special attention to both subject knowledge and academic literacy. This

article reports on perceptions of two cohort participants about the extent of successful embedding of academic literacy in modules and addresses the following research question:

What impact do undergraduate distance education students perceive embedded academic literacy activities have on their study?

2. Materials and methods

This study was informed by the academic literacies research paradigm (Lea, 2004; Lillis & Scott, 2007) which cautions against researching the impact of strategies to develop students' academic literary skills primarily through textual analysis of the work that they produce. Focussing on textual analysis can lead to an oversimplified, reductive view of learning that ignores the importance of students as meaning makers in their own right, whose varied interpretations and experiences of academic literacy teaching should inform and shape its ongoing development (Lea, 2004; Lillis & Tuck, 2016). Following this line of argument, to explore the impact of embedded academic literacy in early childhood study, we chose to draw on the perspectives of the students who engaged in the activities.

The study followed two groups enrolled in an early childhood degree programme, one studying a first-year module and the other a second-year module. All the students in the second-year group had completed the first-year module as it was a compulsory part of the degree programme. Therefore, they had encountered the integrated academic literacy activities approach twice. To explore the perspectives of both groups, the research used a mixed methods approach to generate qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and quantitative data using surveys. The mixed methods approach was chosen as the most pragmatic way of drawing on the range of data sources available whilst supporting corroboration and validation of findings through triangulation (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Sutton, 2006; Denscombe, 2010; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Due to the inductive nature of the study, focussing on the interpretation of descriptive data to answer the research question, qualitative components were considered the core elements and quantitative as supplementary (Morse, 2015). This emphasis was also consistent with the ethnographic underpinnings inherent in academic literacies research, which 'recognizes that the participants' analytic lens and perspectives are central to establishing what may be significant and important in any specific context' (Lillis, 2008, p. 359). Prior to commencing the study, it received ethics approval from The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval reference number: HREC/2016/2400/SHRESTHA).

Data gathering during the research project was sequential (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Morse, 2015) with the focus on generating qualitative data initially (Phase 1) and quantitative information at the final stage (Phase 2). This sequence was followed for the first-year and second-year groups, with data collection for each cohort separated by six months to accommodate the course start dates and the resource capacity of the research team.

2.1. Phase 1

In Phase 1, the aim was to carry out a series of semi-structured telephone interviews with eight students from each year group which were subsequently recorded and transcribed. The interviews took place over a six-month period after the second, fourth, and final assignment because these were points in the module where students reviewed or had been engaged in a series of academic literacy activities. An independent academic literacy researcher conducted all interviews for both year groups. The purpose of engaging a single independent researcher was not only to improve consistency and mitigate against bias (Denscombe, 2010), but also to establish an ongoing relationship with the participants during the interview series. This ongoing relationship was considered important methodologically to realise what Lillis describes as a key element of academic literacies research, adopting 'an openness to writer-insiders' comments, perspectives, and discourses, whether or not these relate to a research focus (textual or otherwise) predefined by the researcher' (Lillis, 2008, p. 360).

The decision to interview by phone was based on the geographical spread of the participants and their familiarity with discussing issues around their studies through distance communication. In addition, the pairing of telephone and semi-structured interview approaches has been recognised as sustaining participant engagement because it maintains the balance between available time, flexible discussion, and gathering rich data (Cachia & Millward, 2011).

All eligible students on the Early Childhood degree in both year groups were invited by email to participate, and following this invitation, volunteers were chosen according to the date of reply. Furthermore, the sample size was determined by the workload capacity of the project interviewer. In both groups, some interviewees withdrew during phase 1 because they found it difficult to maintain availability alongside their study commitments. Consequently, five first-year students six second-year students participated in all three interviews.

2.2. Phase 2

The quantitative supplementary component of the research (Phase 2) consisted of online questionnaires for students in both groups. This phase was included to provide methodological triangulation, supporting corroboration or further interrogation of the main data set, the interviews from Phase 1 (Denscombe, 2010).

The student questionnaire was distributed to all learners in the first and second years on completion of their modules. In order to maintain the validity of the sample and to follow the principles of mixed methodology, the interviewees were omitted from the survey (Morse, 2015). For all other participants, completion of the survey was optional. As the intention was to generate ordinal quantitative data, the design utilised closed rather than open ended questions and also required the participants to respond to statements using a Likert scale or by rank ordering (Denscombe, 2010). To support the coherence between the focus of the questionnaire and the interviews for each year group, the team met with the interviewer to discuss the general issues that appeared to emerge from the conversations with the interviewed students. These meetings also supported the team's familiarisation with the interview transcripts as a foundation to advance to the coding stage of the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From these discussions, the following areas of questioning were formulated in the survey for both the first and second years of study: confidence levels with respect to academic literacy before and during study; the relevance of the academic literacy activities; and the application of academic literacy development to their assignment work and other areas of study.

The administration timing of the survey at the end of the study period may have had an impact on the response rate as it coincided with another institutional end-of-module survey. Thirty-five students responded in the first-year group (representing 10.1% of the whole cohort) and 23 students participated in the second year (representing 17% of the whole cohort). Although the two data sets may appear small, the research team considered them to have value as a supplementary component in corroboration of any themes derived from the qualitative elements.

2.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysis of the interviews was chosen because it supported an examination of the ways in which the students made meaning of this particular aspect of their study, as well as its broader impact on their experience as a student (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In doing so, the intention was to move from description or evaluation of the data to interpretation and consideration of its broader meanings and implications (Patton, 1990, as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006). Taking such an essentially data-driven, inductive approach meant that the coding generated in the analysis was 'open' rather than derived from any preexisting conceptual framework (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Byrne, 2022).

For each year group, preliminary codes were generated by examining the subsets of data (interview 1, interview 2 and interview 3). Following this preliminary coding, initial themes were first

identified within each interview subset and then reconsidered for significance in the context of the combined interview data for the year group. These significant themes were interrogated and verified by the second lead researcher who independently reviewed the data. In addition, phase 2 data from the online questionnaire for each year group was considered at this point to inform the interpretation and corroborate these proposed significant themes (Collins et al., 2006; Howe, 2012).

Following this analytical process, significant themes for both the first-year and the second-year groups emerged based both on prevalence and its ‘keyness’ in capturing something important in relation to the overall research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). To reach a conclusion on the final themes, the two lead researchers then jointly returned to both data sets after a period of detachment from the material in order to reflect on the thematic analysis and collaborate on the generation of the final themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Byrne, 2022). Following this shared review, the key combined themes agreed for the first and second-year groups were:

1. the effectiveness of embedding
2. developing specific areas of academic literacy
3. shifting perspectives between the year groups
4. developing confidence as a writer, and
5. other influences on academic writing.

An additional theme that emerged from the second-year data was:

6. developing perspectives on academic literacy

that highlighted the shifts between the two groups.

3. Findings

In view of the similarities between the themes for each year group, the combined findings for the first-year and second-year groups are reported in this article with the qualitative and quantitative data synthesised (Chiang-Hanisko et al., 2016; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

3.1. The effectiveness of embedding

The responses to the first-year survey indicated that 81% of the sample perceived that the embedding of the academic literacy activities was a positive aspect of the teaching on the module. The interviewees, when asked to explain why they thought the approach was effective, highlighted accessibility and visibility as key:

The information is there and it's not hidden and it's not embedded somewhere where you cannot find it ... (First-year student 1)

Like if I was stuck you always know they were there and I think I would spend more time on the ones that I'm less confident on I mean I suppose that's one of the really good things is that you can go back at any point to them can't you, that's great! (First-year student 5)

In addition to accessibility, first-year interviews suggested that it was the coherence of the embedded activities and the knowledge content of their study that contributed to their effectiveness. Participants highlighted that this coherency was enhanced because embedded academic literacy activities consistently involved writing about early childhood.

... I found that there was a lot more study skills as opposed to just relating to the content so it is teaching you how to write essays, how to understand what you are reading and how to really look into what you are learning and how to submit your essays ... (First-year student 4)

There is two lots of knowledge that you are learning really, you are learning more about the childcare and learning more about the approach to the subject the academic writing and how to write. (First-year student 2)

This was corroborated by the responses in the first-year survey, where 97% of the respondents reported that the examples used in the academic literacy activities assisted in both their general understanding and skill development.

Questionnaire data from the second-year group were similarly positive, with 82% responding that embedding the academic literacy activities in the materials had a positive impact on their study experience. The second-year interviews highlighted similar positivity around such integration and indicated that the particular approach to embedding taken on this module distinguished it from other study experiences:

I just kind of do them [embedded academic literacy activities] as I'm going and I refer back to them when I need them and they're really really helpful ... I don't consider them separate to my module materials. (Second-year student 10)

My main thing coming away from it [academic literacy] was that it's something that I haven't had on either of the other three modules that I've had with the Open University. And it's definitely something that has helped. (Second-year student 8)

3.2. Developing specific areas of academic literacy

When asked about the specific academic literacy skills that they perceived had been refined through engagement with the embedded activities, the first-year interviewees highlighted the use of citations and referencing, as well as the development of a more discursive writing style. In terms of referencing skills, the students emphasised becoming more adept at integrating citations meaningfully within their writing rather than the technical aspects of referencing.

Now I find that I'm not using quotes as much I'm actually paraphrasing and writing it in my own words and then saying, you know, this is where I got it from as opposed to relying heavily on putting chunks of the book in. (First-year student 2)

The students also indicated increased confidence in aspects of critical writing which had been covered in the embedded activities: the provision of examples as evidence; the balanced discussion of positives and negatives; and the ability to compare and contrast. First-year survey respondents corroborated that the development of their citation and referencing had been a particular outcome and also highlighted the improvement of a similar range of basic critical writing skills as the interviewees.

Similarly, activities focussing on critical writing skills were consistently identified by over half of the second-year survey respondents as being the most impactful, particularly those that covered planning a critical discussion and developing a written argument. This finding was strongly reflected in the interviews where the growing understanding of criticality was evident in the way that the participants viewed their learning:

I wasn't struggling with writing it was struggle to make sure that I'd included everything. And that it made sense. 'Building a discussion' and 'Building the critical discussion' just helped me make sure that everything was there before I reordered it. The structure was the thing that I found the most difficult, just because there was so many links to make, the activities just helped me present my argument in a more logical way. (Second-year student 10)

You're trying to write in academic English, but then there's so much more to it than just the words that you're putting on the page. It's where you're sourcing from, it's the referencing that you're using, it's how you're building your

idea. Everything is so interlinked, and it's so intertwined that it's not just one straightforward thing. (Second-year student 8)

3.3. Shifting perspectives from first year to second year

3.3.1. General shifts

Both groups of students identified different aspects of the embedded approach as a strength that possibly reflected their stage of study. For the first-year group, the frequent provision of links in the assignment guide to relevant academic literacy activities was considered contributing to writing 'better' assignments by 88% of the survey respondents. As one first-year interviewee noted:

When I went back to look, especially after I got my feedback from the first assignment looking at how I'd written it I went back to those activities before submitting my second assignment to make sure I was using the techniques I had learned through those activities. (First-year student 2)

Second-year students were similarly positive about the academic literacy activities being structured to support their assignments, with 87% of those surveyed agreeing that this aspect of the embedded approach helped them prepare more effectively for their assessed work. However, a much smaller proportion (57%) responded that they could attribute the writing of better assignments to the activities. Such a disconnect suggests less consistent reliance on the academic literacy activities in the second year. In the interviews with this group, it was apparent that engagement was driven by their own judgement of what they considered their academic literacy needs to be at any particular time:

I like the fact that they're not compulsory, like I think with my very first module and possibly even last year I think I was quite like, you know, I'd go through and do everything. When I didn't have to, I know it's a good idea to but through this one I think I felt, but that's I guess that's me, how I've got more confident with doing it knowing that I can leave this, do this. (Second-year student 11)

When comparing the data on the academic literacy activities that the students found most useful between the first-year and second-year groups, a further shift was evident. First-year students emphasised the practise and enhancement of specific skills (for example, referencing, linking paragraphs, validating statements with evidence), whereas the second-year group highlighted activities which were higher-order skills (such as developing arguments, providing balanced discussion or writing reflectively). The second-year students also highlighted that the development of their academic literacy would have further impact beyond the current module that they had been studying. The majority of the interviewees reflected that such developments would provide them with a strong foundation as they began their third-year study. This finding was echoed in the second-year questionnaire, where 83% of the respondents indicated that they had used the range of learnt skills from the module in other courses they were undertaking.

3.3.2. Developing confidence as a writer

In both the first- and second-year groups, a common theme emerged from the combined data suggesting that the students felt more confident as writers at the completion of the respective modules than at the outset. Following their course of study with embedded academic literacy activities, the first-year survey participants indicated that their confidence had increased. For example, 77% of the respondents stated that they felt more adequately prepared to write future assignments when they left the module. Significantly, four of the five first-year interviewee students attributed their improved confidence in academic writing to their engagement with the embedded academic skills activities, as illustrated by the following quotes:

I think the study skills [i.e., academic literacy] are really brilliant and I think they are helping my writing mature and helping me get the right scope into

what I'm writing, learning to be more specific and things like that has been brilliant! (First-Year Student 3)

Yes it is because honestly since I've started I was struggling a lot with referencing, that was my main major fall and the other thing I was struggling with, you know, was how to construct an essay and the introductory and then how to word it! To be clear in exactly what you need to do on your main body – I used to struggle a lot with that but now I think I have actually got it! Like I'm actually, now I can summarise in less words than I could before! (First-year student 1)

Increased confidence in their academic writing skills also emerged as a strong theme from the second-year interview data. All interviewees in this group commented on the coherent approach to supporting academic literacy in the Early Childhood degree programme and were clear that they had learnt useful foundation skills in the first year which they drew upon in their transition through the second year.

When I first started on University, I wasn't confident at all. But through that year all the study skills [academic literacy] throughout that year, the first year were, they were really helpful with everything. That by the end of it, I felt really confident with it. (Second-year student 9)

As their second-year studies progressed, the interviewees also highlighted that confidence in their own academic literacy skills had developed and acknowledged the role that their engagement with the embedded activities played in this positive change:

Having those (activities) there it gives you that, it gives you more information, so you know where you need to go, and how you need to go around planning it. So a lot of it was a lot more easier. (Second-year student 9)

In line with the first-year data, when reflecting on their levels of assurance at the completion of their second-year module, 78% of the survey respondents indicated that they felt better prepared for writing assignments as they moved to their next level of study.

3.3.3. Other influences on academic writing

Although 78% of the first-year students surveyed indicated that the academic literacy activities adequately met their learning needs, the interviewees highlighted examples of other support that had a positive effect on their writing. These included online sources provided by both their host University (for example, the library) and more generic software for grammar and spell-checking. The interview responses also suggested that some personalised interaction for these distance learning students was key to developing confidence as writers. This often involved friends or family in proof reading and sense checking prior to assignment submissions, as well as more informal contact with fellow students to share specific guidance or provide moral support.

In comparison, interviews with second-year students suggested that there was less involvement of other family members or work colleagues, mainly because of the more complex content of a second-year module. However, as with the first-year students, they often utilised a similar range of general resources outside the materials to support academic writing, although with more awareness that such guidance might lack specificity:

I do have 'Essay Guide for Dummies'. And I do occasionally refer back to it when I am struggling to put together a coherent sentence. So it's relevant but I think I don't actually use it for anything that's (University) specific. (Second-year student 10)

A further theme emerging from the first-year interview group was the significant role that their individual subject tutor played in helping them develop their academic literacy. All interviewees highlighted the contribution that their tutor's guidance had made to their academic writing, both

through ongoing dialogue and through the provision of specific written feedback on assignments. Similarly, 85% of the survey respondents confirmed the value of this tutor feedback, particularly if it included guidance on academic literacy and subject knowledge. An example of such tutor feedback is as follows:

This is a thoughtful and well written paragraph where you have considered your two ideas carefully. I can see how you have utilised the concepts within the chapters to really think about how these ideas link to working with children and their development and well being. You have also linked both ideas back to your specific practice to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of the main concepts relevant to the assignment. You have taken into account the study skills activities around linking words, using paragraphs and writing a summary. A very nice start. (Tutor feedback on first-year student 1's assignment 1).

The significance of tutor feedback was also evident across the second-year data. More than 90% of survey respondents reported that they expected and received comments on their writing, as well as their understanding of the subject matter. These interviewees highlighted that tutor feedback was influential because it was provided within the context of an ongoing learning relationship and was specific to the individual:

By saying 'I know that it's something that you struggle with so well done, you've done it', that's really helpful because it's more personal.... and if you've had feedback on an assignment that's not so good, but is still constructive, that is more helpful in terms of academic writing because you know exactly what you need to improve on and ideally where you can get the support to improve on it. (Second-year student 10)

4. Discussion and conclusion

In response to our original research question, both groups of students were positive about the impact of having academic literacy activities embedded in their courses. This aligns with the findings from other studies that have evaluated the benefits of such an approach (Wingate, 2006; Kennelly et al., 2010; Black & Rechter, 2013). Of course, it could be said that the findings reported on in this research relate to this specific group of students' experience and to the embedding approach used. For early childhood students, such a response can be framed by the suggestion that practitioners in this sector often perceive a particular gulf between their practical abilities and their academic identities (Moloney, 2010; Sims-Schouten & Stittrich-Lyons, 2014). In this context, any pedagogy which aims to develop academic literacy alongside subject knowledge would appear to be particularly appropriate, and approaches which support this such as embedding, especially relevant.

However, it is evident that the key aspects that students identified as strengths in the embedding approach paralleled findings from previous studies:

1. the importance of visibility and accessibility (Black & Rechter, 2013)
2. the duality of the content which utilised their subject knowledge while practising their academic literacy skills (Gunn et al., 2013; Black & Rechter, 2013; Skinner & Mort, 2009), and
3. the connectivity between academic literacy activities and the assessment requirements (Skinner & Mort, 2009; Murray & Nallaya, 2016).

The most significant element of the embedding approach followed in the current study was a successful close collaboration between the subject specialists and the academic specialist to design and write academic literacy activities fully embedded in the curriculum, which were clearly and explicitly linked with each assignment. This approach was underpinned by the assumption

that all students need academic literacy support (Wingate, 2018) rather than a deficit view of targeting ‘weak’ or ‘nonnative speaker’ students. The approach was context-sensitive and based on student needs (evidence) rather than following a tutor’s ‘hunch’, which made the academic literacy activities engaging. Higher education practitioners can adapt the approach to their teaching context.

In addition, it is worth noting that although most of the research in this area has been conducted with students in face-to-face learning environments, the findings relating to the characteristics of effective embedding approaches identified by distance learning students in this study show strong similarities. It should also be recognised that such correlation may have been enhanced because often the embedded academic literacy support offered in face-to-face institutions was provided online and therefore studied in effect ‘at a distance’ (Black & Rechter 2013; Gunn et al., 2013; Wingate et al., 2011; Prymachuk et al., 2012).

In addition to reiterating findings from previous research, this study also contributes an additional perspective to the field because it was possible to combine the data between two year groups and gain a more longitudinal perspective of the impact of embedded academic literacy. Previous studies have focused on relatively shorter time periods, for example over one semester in Gunn et al.’s (2013) study or one term in Wingate et al.’s (2011) research. Other research has investigated the impact on different cohorts of students at the same stage of study. For example, Skinner and Mort’s (2009) investigation gathered data from five first-year groups. The evident positivity of the students about the embedding approach reported in this current study from consecutive first- and second-year groups suggests the significance of building continuity into the design of the academic literacy activities, by following consistent principles, in this case ensuring visibility, utilising subject content, and alignment with the assessment strategy. However, despite the consistent approach, the research also revealed differences between the two groups.

The shift in academic literacy areas that the students found most useful between the first year and second year, from paragraphing and referencing (first-year) to developing an argument and criticality (second-year), could be seen to reflect established theoretical understanding of academic literacy development and progression (Coffin & Donohue, 2014; Wingate et al., 2011). The trajectory also validates proposals for course design made in other studies where there is progression from the more mechanical skills of writing to the more discursive focused practice as students move between levels (Ciabattari, 2012). The research finding that the second-year group, although remaining positive about the embedded activities, was less definitive about their impact, appears contradictory. It is possible that such an anomaly highlighted the increasing experience, self-confidence, and autonomy of this group as students progressed in higher education. This suggestion could also be reflected in the finding that second-year students valued the optional academic literacy skills activities. Furthermore, the theme that emerged from the second-year interviews, that they felt capable of applying their new academic literacy skills to their future studies, is a further illustration of the evolving agency of students, their developing identity as academic writers, and their accruing cultural capital (Black & Rechter, 2013; Gourlay, 2009).

The relationship between student’s self-confidence and assimilation with academic literacy practices during transitional phases of university experience has been consistently documented in previous studies (Elton, 2010; Gourlay, 2009; Hodgson & Harris, 2012; Krause, 2001). In the current research, both groups of students made connections between the support that the embedded activities provided and their developing academic literacy. However, it is important to note that participants also identified other contributing factors to their progression in addition to the integration of activities. For example, the use of other generic resources and the support with scholarly work from a range of people including friends, colleagues, or family members, were also highlighted as being important. In particular, the participants in both data sets emphasised the impact that tutor feedback and marks given for work had on their perceptions of their own level of academic literacy. This intricate and interdependent relationship between achievement and

student self-identification of themselves as scholars (Marsh & Martin, 2011; Sims-Schouten & Stittrich-Lyons, 2014) has been observed in other studies of embedded academic literacy activities (Wingate et al., 2011; Skinner & Mort, 2009). Its identification as a key factor reiterates previous calls for further investigation of the detailed nature of tutor feedback and how ‘marking’ in the broadest sense can support academic literacy development (Gourlay, 2009; Hodgson & Harris, 2012; Shrestha & Coffin, 2012). In the context of this current study, the range of influences identified by students aligns with the understanding that academic literacy is more than a skill set that can be developed through ‘simple reproduction and transmission of preconceived ideas’ (Hodgson & Harris 2012, p. 10). Its development is part of a dynamic that involves a ‘complex, socially situated set of meaning-making practices’ (Gourlay, 2009, p. 182). Those who took part in this study were self-selecting volunteers from across the range of students who brought their own starting points, strengths, and anxieties. However, regardless of their level of academic literacy skills on beginning their studies, or indeed how these developed during the module, the data from this study clearly indicated that they overwhelmingly felt that the embedding approach increased their self confidence in writing assignments and engaging with future academic work. This indicates the importance of providing all students with effective academic literacy support as an integral aspect of their studies whatever their subject, whatever their context, and whatever their aspirations and aligns with the assertions of leading academics in the field (Wingate 2018; Wingate et al., 2011).

In conclusion, despite the relatively small scale of the research, this study reiterates the significant impact embedding academic literacy activities can have, in this case from the perspective of students. In doing so, it also highlights several salient points which warrant consideration in the development of disciplinary writing pedagogy generally. First, the shift in views between the first- and second-year groups as to which embedded activities were seen as being particularly useful confirms the need for progression to be visible within the academic literacy curriculum design. Furthermore, this research suggests that the delivery of this curriculum needs to be geared to support flexible participation, especially as students become more experienced. Secondly, the connection the students made in the study between their increasing confidence in terms of their academic literacy and assignment completion reemphasizes the importance of ensuring there is connectivity between these two elements. The relationship between academic achievement and confidence is ‘reciprocally related and mutually reinforcing’ (Marsh & Martin, 2011, p. 72) and this study reiterates that dynamic. The implication appears to be that any academic literacy focused activity needs to support the students’ assignment preparation clearly and explicitly. Third, although this study involved distance learning students, their specification that embedded activities should be frequent, easily accessible, and relevant also offers appropriate areas of consideration for those colleagues working in ‘face-to-face’ teaching environments. The inference is that, besides regularity, the teaching of academic literacy should be an integral part of their subject course not delivered by a separate department or involving decontextualised materials. This links to a final implication for practice suggested in this study, and that is ensuring the academic literacy activities and support draw from the core subject curriculum. Collaborative planning, design, review and ongoing research into impact underpinned the development of the course that was the focus of this study. Such ongoing collaboration is seen as a key component to the effective embedding of academic literacy support (Wingate, 2018), although the sustainability of such working partnerships because of institutional pressures is often jeopardised (Macnaught et al., 2022). To promote the continued value and resourcing of such collaborative work, the necessity is to ‘accumulate resounding evidence from “bottom-up” projects to demonstrate that curriculum-integrated academic literacy instruction leads to improvements in student learning’ (Wingate 2018, p. 358) and more urgent research on this type of collaboration is required. It has been the intention of this study to make its own small contribution to this case.

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Appendix 1. First Year Course – Example of academic literacy activities

Block 1 Academic Literacy Activities.

Study Week	Academic Literacy Activity
1	Activity 1.4 How to make notes from a chapter.
2	Activity 2.4 Using linking words to join sentences and to make a paragraph.
3	Activity 3.4 How paragraphs work-the connection between a paragraph and a main topic.
4	Activity 4.4 Writing a summary from notes and how to join paragraphs to give writing a sequence.
Assign-ment 1	Academic literacy focus: write two paragraphs on a chosen topic and explaining its meaning.
5	Activity 5.4 Why use citations and references.
6	Activity 6.4 The components of in text citations and references.
7	Activity 7.4 Recognising the main features and functions of introductions and conclusions when writing essays.
8	Activity 8.4 Understanding an essay question: process words and content words.
Assign-ment 2	Academic literacy focus: Explaining two key points. Mini essay with introduction and conclusion – describing and illustrating.

Appendix 2. Second Year Course- Example of academic literacy activities

Block 1 Academic literacy Activities.

Week	Activity
2	Activity 2.4 Reviewing your approach to note making
3	Activity 3.4 Noting key points from a journal article Activity 3.5 Citations and referencing: citing from the study guides and module books
Assign-ment 1	Academic literacy focus: Short essay- summarising, describing and explaining.
4	Activity 4.5 Taking notes critically: looking for claims and evidence
5	Activity 5.5 Developing your argument
6	Activity 6.5 Developing your citation and referencing skills
7	Activity 7.5 Reflecting on your own viewpoint

8	Activity 8.5 Thinking further about claims and evidence
9	Activity 9.2 Secondary referencing from Study Guides Activity 9.3 Reviewing and summarising journal articles
Assignment 2	Academic literacy focus: Summarising findings reported in a journal article and discussing these findings.

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