

The End of the Essay?

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Introduction

There is no doubt that the essay is a noble and well-established genre in higher education, at least in the UK, Canada and Australia¹. Womack (1993) calls it the ‘default genre’ for the assessment of understanding, not only in higher education but at the upper levels of school and college education too. In earlier work (eg Andrews 1995, pp9-18), I’ve explored the etymological origin of the term ‘essay’, coming as it does into English from the French *essai* meaning an ‘attempt’. The term’s derivation from words meaning ‘first drafts’ or ‘attempts’ is not reflected in the current use of the term to describe finished assignments submitted for assessment or examination. Although students might be generally assumed to be attempting an analysis of a certain section of knowledge in order to demonstrate their emerging understanding of it, it is usually assumed in higher education that once the essay is submitted, the die is cast. The essay² represents the state of a student’s understanding and is assessed accordingly. The submission and the response (assuming a response of high quality) have a formative function, but their

¹ In undergraduate composition classes in the USA, there has been a move to break away from the essay form to more specific text-types like the ‘position paper’ and the ‘research paper’. The context for teaching essay writing skills is also very different in higher education from that in Australia or the UK. According to Hill (1995, p. 171) “in universities in the United States, all entering students are required to take a course designed to enhance their writing skills. In this course, they are exposed to kinds of writing tasks that they will likely encounter during their university education, and they are given practice in the types of general cognitive skills – analysis, argument, interpretation – that will be expected of them. While the instructors who teach these courses are not usually trained extensively in logic and argument analysis, part of their job is to teach students some general principles of effective argumentation and to evaluate the argumentative essays that their students write.”

principal function is to gain a mark or grade on the way to a degree. In this respect, the essay is more like ‘an offering to a great personage’ – one of the definitions of ‘essay’ in the Oxford English Dictionary.

A very short history of the essay

Although the modern essay is assumed to start with Montaigne and Bacon, the derivation of the Renaissance essay is from the rhetorical speeches of classical Greece (and before) through sermons, *progymnasmata* (in effect, form and style exercises in the grammar schools of the early Renaissance), occasional pieces and other short expository forms. As Gross (1991) points out in *The Oxford Book of Essays*, the form “can shade into the character sketch, the travel sketch, the memoir, the *jeu d’esprit*” (p.xix) but its distinguishing marks post-Montaigne are “intimacy and informality” (ibid). This casual – or seemingly casual – style allows for the expression of discursive thoughts, not necessarily logically structured. However, the forms of the essay employed in school and higher education have departed significantly from those expected in literary magazines or as features in newspapers. While the latter are characterised by an intelligent informality, the former are bound by assessment demands, school/university genre conventions and ‘structure’. And yet, even within the convention of the school/university essay, there is a spectrum ranging from the explicit, abstract and logically structured at one end, to the more personal, idiosyncratic and expressive – “a loose sally of the mind”, to quote Dr. Johnson – at the other. It is this spectrum which makes sets of criteria for the assessment of essays so difficult to compose and apply; and, more importantly, for students to interpret.

Despite Corbett’s (1965) seminal work for college students on what classical rhetoric can offer to shape academic writing, the essay has been a matter of concern in the last twenty years in school and higher education. Freedman and Pringle (e.g. 1980) set the tone with their analyses of the problems faced by school and university students in composing essays, whereas in the UK debate focussed largely on

² The definition recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the one generally applicable in schooling and higher education: “a composition of moderate length on any particular subject, originally implying want of finish, but now said of a composition more or less elaborate in style, though limited in range”.

secondary level school writing (Medway 1986, APU 1988). Swales' exploration of genres in academic writing (1990) moved the debate into the field of social discourses, and in the 1990s there was increasing concentration on the topic at secondary (eg Andrews 1989, 1995; Sheeran and Barnes 1991) and tertiary/higher education levels (eg Newkirk 1989, Cockcroft and Cockcroft 1992, Womack 1993, Heilker 1996, Mitchell 1996, Creme and Lea 1997, Mitchell and Riddle 2000, Andrews and Mitchell 2001). Concern is expressed on a number of counts: the poor performance of secondary school age children in argument as opposed to narrative forms; the stultifying nature of the academic essay form and its effect on the expression of argument; the structural weakness in argumentation at conceptual and 'arrangement' levels; the inadequate nature of evidence provided to support claims; the conflation between 'assignment' and 'essay' in students' minds; the lack of explicit criteria and/or guidance from tutors on the writing of the essay; and the lack of personal conviction or 'voice' in the writing.

Why is the essay so central to assessment in higher education?

There are a number of reasons that can be put forward for the centrality of the essay in higher education. First, it is a genre and text-type in which *explicitness* is a key characteristic. In an essay, you spell out connections, whether the essay is expository or argumentative. There is little or no suggestiveness or nuancing in the essay: everything is 'above board'. Second, the essay sits firmly within *the rationalist and humanist paradigm*; it is supported by a belief that discourse in words is important, and that the presentation and exchange of ideas is fundamental to human civilized discourse. Third, it is a genre that lends itself to persuasive discourse, again in an explicit way: ideas are paraded, supported by evidence, linked into meaningful sequences and commented upon in order to *persuade* the reader of the strength of the writer's position. These related qualities make the essay eminently *assessable*: that is probably the main reason that the essay has such a hold on assessment practices and conventions in the academy. Any academic will confirm that, despite the presence of other forms of submission in the academy, the essay allows tutors/supervisors/lecturers not only to gauge the student's understanding, but also to differentiate

between students and thus arrive at a marking list. The essay, then, is the genre *par excellence* for assessment in the academy.

If you take a conspiracy view of affairs, you might say that the centrality of the essay in the academy is a subtly insidious form of gatekeeping in that the ‘ground-rules’ (Sheeran and Barnes 1991) for success are not always spelt out. Despite the presence of handouts on ‘what makes a good essay’ – which vary from obsession with surface form, like attention to referencing systems, proof-reading etc to vague advice on ‘structuring your ideas’ – it is often not clear what tutors mean by an ‘essay’ and what students understand by it. When there is a mismatch between tutors’ and students’ expectations, trouble can ensue. This trouble is compounded by tutors who write elliptical or shorthand comments in the margins of essays, like ‘*non-sequitur*’ or ‘?’, or simply concentrate on the surface features at the expense of any real attention being devoted to the structuring and expression of ideas in the essay.

In ideal circumstances, on the other hand, tutors set out the ground rules, respond to student outlines or drafts, and write full and explicit responses to work once it is submitted. An example of the ground rules is given here:

A typical assignment is characterised by strengths in relation to some of the assessment criteria, and weaknesses in relation to others. Therefore, in reaching a decision about the grade to be awarded, the balance between strengths and weaknesses is assessed.

Work of PASS standard will typically demonstrate the majority of the following characteristics where applicable:

- a satisfactory understanding of the main points and issues in the assignment;
- a clear and logical structure;
- a well-sustained sequence of ideas;
- development of a well-substantiated argument, claim or theory;

- evidence of critical engagement with substantial and relevant literature;
- sound analysis of the main points and issues, with reference to literature where appropriate;
- the relating of conclusions to arguments made and evidence presented;
- critical reflection on own experience, where appropriate;
- expertise in key aspects of the specialist field;
- little or no irrelevant material;
- no errors of fact which detract significantly from the content of the assignment;
- no unsubstantiated value judgements

and in addition, for a research-based assignment involving the collection of empirical data:

- evidence of critical engagement with methodological literature;
- satisfactory presentation and analysis of the data gathered.

Some analysis of the language of such guidelines or ground-rules is necessary. First, it should be pointed out that the diction is cautious: “work of PASS standard will *typically* demonstrate the *majority* of the following characteristics *where applicable*” (my italics). Like the term ‘normally’ in much assessment discourse in education contexts, there is always room for variation when it comes to the presentation of actual texts for assessment. One could argue that the criteria are couched so cautiously as to be useless; a student could argue, for example, that none of the criteria was *applicable* to his/her work because that work sang to a different tune; or that *the majority* of criteria were inapplicable. Perhaps, also, the majority of criteria that were applicable could be the ones that were least important (there is no hierarchy of value). Second, when it comes to particular criteria, what is “satisfactory” or “well-sustained” to one person may be unsatisfactory or unsustained to another; relevance is relative; and “where appropriate” is a slippery phrase, apparently revealing what counts as appropriate but actually leaving to the marker’s judgement the definition of propriety. Despite the ambiguous nature of the diction, “work of REFERRAL [ie close to fail]

standard will typically demonstrate failure to meet several of the pass criteria or one of them in a more significant way”.

The interesting thing about this set of ground rules is that despite the fact they are relatively explicit, international students on an MA programme still did not feel that they made sufficiently explicit the requirements of the assignment. There was no guidance, for example, on the structure or subheadings of the expected assignment, and therefore no guide to the essential shape of the genre or text-type expected. It is possible, in my wish to be liberal enough to allow a range of text-types, that I had unwittingly forced the students into a guessing game of what form and format I was expecting. They therefore would feel safer reverting to what they took to be the structure of the conventional essay: introduction, development, conclusion (itself a distillation of classical rhetorical structures).

Alternatives to the essay

So much for the conventional essay. What about alternative forms and text-types? Perhaps because of the Yeatsian maxim that ‘ancient salt is best packing’, students seem reluctant to abandon the essay as their preferred form for submitting coursework. Another reason for their timidity might be that they would rather the devil you know than the devil you don’t know. I want to examine some examples of students’ work that do not follow conventional format in order to look at the possibilities and problems therein. I will discuss four examples: essays written in metaphorical mode, Socratic dialogue, autobiographical writing and a postmodernist thesis.

A visiting Italian student of mine recently submitted an essay on language diversity and multilingualism which was not only clearly articulated, well-structured, well-argued, scholarly in its range and depth of referencing etc – all the general criteria we would expect an undergraduate essay to meet in the humanities – but also written with imagination, commitment and verve. It used the device of a gardening metaphor to give it an extra dimension. Its title, ‘On the art of gardening’ was played out in sections entitled ‘All around

the garden', on identity, passports and ethnic capital; 'Say it with a flower' on individual and collective experience of bi- and multilingualism; 'Say it with more flowers' on the debate on assimilation, multiculturalism and "what's in between"; 'Uprooting obsolete gardening practices' on the anachronistic nature of monolingualism; and finally, in appendices listed as 'Small Flowers'. Here are the opening words of the Introduction (it should have been titled 'Come into the garden'):

'Language diversity makes the language more difficult to tend' (Garcia, in Baker 1998).
Gardeners need to protect rarer flowers, control those that spread quickly and naturally, increase those in danger of extinction, and maybe add more flowers to make the garden more attractive to the outside environment. In fact, the garden of the 21st century – and all that is around it – is no longer static and fixed...

And so the essay progresses through its argument to its first-class rating. Essays of lesser quality tend to either fall short on some of the criteria listed above, or they misconstrue the nature of the essay and the nature of the contract with the marker of the essay – the gatekeeper of standards and of the text-types approved by the academy.

The Socratic dialogue, by definition, takes dialogic form. That is to say, the argument proceeds explicitly, as in the conventional essay, with the entertainment of abstract propositions, the provision of evidence to support them and other devices. In a sense, the Socratic dialogue is more explicit than the essay in that the two or more voices (eg references, an implied counterlocutor) that are usually distilled into a single authorial voice in the essay are here revealed for what they are: at least two voices. A typical example of the beginning of a Socratic dialogue in translation is this:

Socrates: I dare say, Lysis, that your father and mother love you very much?
Lysis: Certainly, Socrates.
Socrates: Then they would wish you to be as happy as possible?
Lysis: Yes.

Socrates: Is a person happy when he is a slave and cannot do what he likes?

Lysis: I should think not.

The potential weakness of Lysis's position is already exposed by Socrates who goes on to argue that a young person can never do entirely as he likes and therefore cannot be happy. In Socratic dialogue, the dice are weighted toward Socrates: he uses the interlocutors to reveal the inadequacy of their position or reasoning, demonstrating the truth of an argument through exposure to underlying principles. The pedagogical approach is similar to that of a teacher who, through questioning, uses students' responses to demonstrate a case, rather than following and answering student questions.

When the Socratic dialogue is used as a form of response by undergraduate students, the relationship between the questioner and answerer is not so much one of an authority figure and an apprentice, as between two voices in an internal dialogue. In the following extract from a 4000-word 'essay', a student has presented a series of photographs and is exploring the theoretical aspects of framing:

What are you trying to say by showing these photographs?

I was trying to convey the idea of the power of framing. By framing images we are shaping what is shown and sometimes creating a false impression of an event. Through this kind of framing we can learn that we must not believe our first impressions. We must learn not to stereotype...A frame gives something a focus and so can manipulate an image to disfigure the truth. By framing something we are forcing our selection onto others.

The device of question-and-answer gives the student the opportunity to be self-critical, to reveal his or her underlying assumptions – and by revealing the ideology underlying the propositions that are put forward, opens up the possibility of criticism. The oft-repeated demand on undergraduate and postgraduate students, *viz* that work must be 'critical', is made more accessible by a simple device like question-and-answer format.

Examples of reflective critical autobiographical work in students' assignments are rarer than we might imagine (such is the emphasis on the disinterested voice) but, nevertheless, a combination of a personal positioning and an authoritative critical exploration of an idea is possible. In the worlds of journalism and *belles lettres* (cf *The New Yorker*, *The Guardian*, *The London Review of Books*) personal essays of this kind are common; they sit in the tradition going back to Montaigne, Bacon and Addison and *The Spectator*. In a first year undergraduate essay on the spectator's role in drama/theatre, a particular student begins by reflecting on being a spectator at a major football match in a crowd of over 67,000 people:

I pictured the game without these onlookers, a ball being kicked around, players doing what they do best but for what purpose? I tried to imagine a goal being scored without the roar of appreciation and joy that filled the stadium immediately afterwards, and how the players would feel having just missed a goal without the clapping which followed to say that it was a good effort and it doesn't mean it's all over. It was a difficult vision to conjure up in my mind, one that felt wrong and pointless...

The essay continues by comparing the role of the audience in literature, art and theatre:

An audience member of a theatre production has similar responsibilities to that of a viewer of a painting, in that they have the choice of whether or not to be fully indulged in the performance or stand back and simply watch so as to constructively criticize. Their obligation to artists, however, differs greatly in that their participation in some cases is essential to the success of the play.

Throughout the essay, the student weaves her own experience as a Drama/Education student and as an actor, with a critical appraisal of the role of the audience in different contexts. She cites other works on the topic so that, in the same way as for a dialogue, she is able to bring in other voices – as in the conventional essay.

My third examples relate to the doctoral thesis – a text-type that is bound by tight convention and which might be termed a very long essay. I wish to draw attention to two types of writing for the PhD/DPhil, however, that break the convention and thus tell us something different about writing a large-scale argument at doctoral level. First, a number of years ago, I co-examined a PhD thesis which did not look like a thesis. Although it was bound in the conventional way, it consisted of sections of narrative, poetry, blank pages, highly figurative writing – as well as sections of conventional argumentative/discursive prose. This experimental *Tristram Shandy*-like work left out many of the explicit links and structures of the conventional thesis (eg signposting) in favour of gaps and silences for the reader to fill. Reading the thesis was therefore a hard but enjoyable task: as a reader, I had to make my own connections between the various sections and respond to implications as well as explications in the work. The other external examiner and I were clear the candidate should be awarded the PhD – the work fulfilled all the criteria for the award – though we did ask for a brief *vade mecum* at the start to advise the reader of his/her role. Our request for a brief note to the reader at the start to alert him/her to the challenge ahead was perhaps a gesture towards explicitness and the conventional form of the essay/thesis. Reading the work made us think all the more clearly about the top-down and ideas-based nature of the essay, and of its hold on conventional practice at doctoral as well as at lower levels of performance in the academy.

My second example of unconventionality in writing at doctoral level is the case of a current student who, in her early drafts of a literature review on discourses of schooling in an Asian country, is writing with personal commitment and verve: one might say, from anger:

Discourses in...high schools nowadays still very much accord to the management style of old capitalism and the ethos of dictator politics. Mass control and authoritarian teaching are adopted [from the start]. Schools are very much mass-production factories, small business companies which constitute the mainstream economic power in [the country], or concentration camps with bottom-line workers (students) who do [not] understand what they are doing and middle managers (teachers) to pass messages from the top (the

principal) and supervise them in their work (making sure students attend and are awake in every class, wear correct uniforms and do the jobs asked even when they are already dog-tired). The goal of this factory is mass production (scores in the examination) and the profit for this factory exceeds that for the students.

At this stage in the writing, the prose is not supported by references to existing research; rather, it is driven by intense personal commitment. Later, the student refers to authorities in the field of social critique and discourse analysis to underpin her argument. But the intense personal writing is framed by references to Gee et al's *The New Work Order* (Gee et al 1997) and followed by close reference to works about the ideologies concerned and about the social and political context in the country in question. Such writing cannot be considered arid; on the contrary, the political positioning and commitment is a welcome quality, framed as it is within the checks and balances of academic discourse. Our role as supervisors of this research is to help the student maintain the energy, critical edge and passion of her research while at the same time ensuring that she does what is necessary to fulfil her lesser aim: the achievement of a successful thesis and the award of PhD. We wish more students wrote with such commitment.

The personal voice

I showed an earlier draft of this article to undergraduate students on an 'Argumentation in Education' module, offering them the chance to comment on its argument and also to see if the experience of other students chimed with their own. One student wrote:

I have found during my short time at [the University] that one's own personal style can be an asset or a handicap depending on the assessor. For example, you enjoyed your student's metaphor of global languages and a garden. I have tried metaphors and anecdotes (admittedly some too puerile) on some lecturers and have had them dismissed as not academic enough. Consequently I have become more impersonal in my writing.

Whereas 16-year old students at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level have been encouraged, since 1986, to combine personal response with a more ‘impersonal’ understanding of a subject, sixth form and higher education seem wedded to the notion that the essay should be written with an impersonal voice. It is as if there is a hierarchy of the personal/impersonal in the grading of essays: for the bottom grades, it is acceptable to express opinion in a personal way (but usually unsupported by evidence or reference to the works of others); in the middle grades, convention dictates that the personal voice is erased and the impersonal, detached voice is favoured; perhaps only in the highest grades is the personal allowed back in, as long as it is supported or forms part of a work that is heavily referenced and evidenced.

The student quoted above, however, has retreated to the impersonal because of a perceived inconsistency between tutors: some welcome divergence from the norm, others don’t. Those who don’t like it feel that “metaphors and anecdotes”, for example, are inappropriate in the academic genre of the essay, perhaps because they move the work away from the rationalist, explicit, distanced voice they are looking for. The challenge for departments in higher education is to debate such variation and work out a common policy and practice so that students are neither disadvantaged nor confused; and so that students can find the appropriate form of expression for what they want to say in assignments. In such debates, it is likely that lecturers and teachers will get behind the surface forms and their associations, and begin to concentrate on the arrangement and expression of ideas. The key move forward pedagogically will be to recognise that, on the one hand, finding the right channels for expression, growth and learning in written assignments is a rhetorical issue that needs attention; but also that lecturers need to broaden their sense of what is possible in higher education assignments and be clear about the extent and nature of that variation.

Conclusion

Is the essay dead? No. The essay, both in its literary/journalistic form and in its shape as the default genre of assessment in schools, further and higher education, is alive and well. Part of its longevity is a result of

its flexibility, its ability to adapt to different functions. Although it reflects the rationalist paradigm, underpinned by argumentation and in turn by logic, dialectic and rhetoric, it gives students the space to inject personal perspectives, to alter the sequence and play with the tone of the genre. Abreactions or alternatives to the essay – like the Socratic dialogue, the autobiographical critical reflection, the book review, the diatribe/tract – can be seen as true alternatives to the default genre, or they can be seen as alternative versions of or routes toward the essay, keeping it alive by offering access to its essentially multi-voiced nature, drawing attention its explicit, rationalist nature, or offering a different angle for the writer/reader. Refreshing a genre like this, or indeed challenging more vigorously its dominance as the default genre of the academy, is what keeps the most important qualities alive: clear thinking, exchange of views, reasoned commitment and lively expression.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Sally Mitchell of Queen Mary College, University of London, for reading an earlier draft of this article; to undergraduate students on the ‘Argumentation in Education’ module at The University of York; and to the following students for agreeing to have extracts from their work quoted: Babita Pohoomull, Sabrina Huang, Katherine Ryan, Silvia Saporetti and Angie Sellars. The article is based on a paper given at the international conference ‘Genres and Discourses in Education, Work and Cultural Life: Encounters of Academic Disciplines on Theories and Practices’ at University College, Oslo on 14th May 2001.

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Word length

4824 words (4615 without footnotes)