

Has the traditional essay/term paper seen better days? Moving toward authentic assessment in the university classroom

Perhaps one of the most universally applied assessment tools in universities is the academic essay. While a preponderance of research has addressed the effectiveness of the traditional 'essay' or 'term paper' assignment for the assessment of the development of students' critical thinking and problem solving skills, little has been published about the general efficacy of the tool for measuring specific course learning outcomes. With the plethora of authentic assessment tools currently available, it is questionable whether the traditional essay provides the best means for measuring student academic achievement.

Written assessment tools often present insurmountable challenges for first year students who feel it necessary to focus on the writing and referencing process (previously unfamiliar to them) and not on course content. They often think of these activities as 'research' and see little relationship to their chosen areas of study (especially in the professions and sciences). These assessments also represent tremendous marking load for teaching academics. Is it worth it? Is academic writing really the primary skill all current university students need to learn?

For the purposes of this workshop, the term paper/academic essay is defined as a long piece of expository writing addressing either a specific or general topic that is required to be written in standard essay style and referenced academically in one of the myriad of referencing styles.

This workshop will consider the contributions of current published evaluation research regarding the academic essay, and current thinking around how this may or may not be congruent with the engaged student activities desirable for the modern (often blended) classroom. Focus will be placed on whether the skills developed and measured through students' writing of essays are those overtly stated in specific course outlines/syllabi, or whether the majority of the effort is directed toward some common generic skills (such as critical thinking) that university teachers feel responsible for developing regardless of the content of the course. Current research indicates that if this is the case, the essay may not be a particularly effective method of assessing evidence of competency.

Workshop facilitators are Professor Carol Miles, Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Newcastle whose expertise is in the area of psychometrics and educational measurement/university assessment, and Keith Foggett, Associate Director of Learning Development, responsible for providing student support that focusses on assisting students in developing academic writing skills to succeed at academic essays.

Workshop participants will complete an exercise considering a number of traditional essay assignments from a variety of disciplines and determine the learning outcomes that are actually being measured, the activities students will need to perform to successfully complete the assignment and the objectivity of the grading procedures. A selection of more authentic assessment tasks will be presented and participants will be asked to reconsider the validity of the essay assignment compared to other forms of assessment. An extensive reference list will be supplied to participants.