

oral and written elements within an assignment. We can therefore allot some marks to the written work, but give further marks for face-to-face communication, for example, through a presentation to peers, or answering questions about the written work, where probing questions can be used to gauge depth of understanding.

4. GET STUDENTS THEMSELVES PRACTICED AT ASSESSING ESSAYS

A core skill for effective students is the ability to evaluate how good their work is *during the actual production of it* (Sadler, 2010) so gaining practice in seeing what comprises a really good essay can help them write better ones themselves. This can be one of the fastest ways of letting them know how we might assess essays and inducts them quickly into the tips and wrinkles which can make their forays in essay design more successful (for further information see TACIT Guide 7 - Getting students to self-assess to deepen their learning and develop feedback dialogues).

5. HELP STUDENTS UNDERSTAND WHAT GOOD ESSAYS LOOK LIKE

Early in any course, discuss in class good, medium and poor examples of essays, so students learn how best to evidence their learning in this particular medium, and what is valued in the discipline or field being studied.

6. FAMILIARISE STUDENTS FROM AN EARLY STAGE WITH THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROCESSES OF PLANNING, DRAFTING, RE-DRAFTING AND EDITING THEIR ESSAYS

In previous learning contexts, they may have had lots of help from teachers in improving drafts, which they can't necessarily expect to receive in the higher education context, so they need to learn how to review and improve their own work and to appreciate that essays are usually best not just written 'straight from the brain', but must be adjusted, fine-tuned and improved before submission.

FIVE ALTERNATIVES TO ESSAYS

To lead to more authentic and productive measures of learning (Race 2015) we can ask students to:

1. PREPARE A WORD CONSTRAINED ANNOTATED PRIORITISED BIBLIOGRAPHY, FOR EXAMPLE OF THEIR TOP FIVE SOURCES

21st century students need to become adept at sourcing and prioritising information from the mass that is available, so asking them to find, say, two journal articles, two web sources and a book they have found useful, to explain how they found them, and their rationale for their choices (including what they rejected) can form the basis of a constructive and productive dialogue about information management.

2. SUBMIT INCREMENTALLY SHORT ELEMENTS OF TEXT ON A BLOGSITE TO DEMONSTRATE THEIR EVOLVING UNDERSTANDING OF AN ISSUE OR TOPIC

Tutors and peers can then comment on this emergent thinking, enabling students to broaden and deepen their understanding.

3. REVIEW A DOSSIER OF EVIDENCE AND SUMMARISE THEIR LEARNING FROM THEM IN A 500-WORD EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This matches the kinds of task that many will encounter in industry and the professions in many disciplines and requires the same kind of clear thinking and effective writing skills that an essay does but asks more of the student.

4. PRODUCE A WORD-CONSTRAINED LIST OF ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST A COURSE OF ACTION IN A COMPLEX TOPIC, AND A SHORT RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION

This again mirrors the kinds of activity that many graduates will be asked to undertake in 'real life'.

5. WRITE AN ARTICLE OR A FEATURE FOR A JOURNAL, NEWSLETTER OR MAGAZINE AS DESIGNATED BY THE TUTOR

This task requires students to write fluently and effectively while matching tone and register to a specific publication and can challenge students much more than simply writing an essay. In some programmes, students actually submit to publications even as undergraduates and succeed in getting their work published.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

There is a place for assessment by essays in 21st century higher education, but it might be much smaller than current usage would suggest. If we use essays, we need to make them as authentic an assessment method as we can and we can also explore alternatives that test similar or overlapping skills in more relevant and valid ways.

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