Discuss: If essays are dead, then where does that leave everything else?

A response to: Shirley Alexander's 'Buying essays: how to make sure assessment is authentic'

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Professor Shirley Alexander is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Teaching, Learning & Equity) at the University of Technology, Sydney. On 12 November 2014, an article of hers appeared in *The Conversation*: 'Buying essays: how to make sure assessment is authentic.' That article traverses, in an abbreviated way, three significant concerns about university assessment tasks. Those three concerns, in sum, apparently render essays 'dead' 'as the primary form of assessment'.

In what follows, I'd like to set out and respond to Alexander's objections to the essay form. Then I'll make some observations about what essays are good for and why, perhaps, some people can't understand that usefulness.

The first concern of Alexander's that drives a nail into the essay-form's coffin is that there are, apparently, 'cheating factories' pumping out plagiarised or ghost-written essays. A search is then undertaken to find ways and means to prevent students cheating; ways and means of which the US National Security Agency would be proud: biometric scanning; hermetically sealing students in exam rooms; or conversely allowing students access in an exam room to everything they'd need to (dare I say it?) write an essay; hoping for 'ghost writer' whistle-blowers; and, in an odd association, 'high-touch, face-to-face learning'.

Contrary to this intensified surveillance of students (who obviously are guilty until proven otherwise), I find that the electronic matching software used at my university works very well in detecting plagiarism in extended-response assessment tasks, if indeed that degree of surveillance is deemed necessary.

When Shirley Alexander's essay finishes dealing with the advantages of exterminating essays to prevent students from cheating, then interwoven in the paragraphs that follow are the other two death-dealers to the essay form: the need for 'authentic' (or 'real-life') assessment; and its companion, meeting employers' demands for 'real-life' work skills.

Here, concerns about types of 'authentic' assessment and the vocational 'value' of university courses converge. Alexander emphasises this relationship by asking, 'When, for instance, in one's real life [read: 'in a job'] does one

ever have to write an essay, unless you happen to be an academic?' But this begs the question: what is an essay and in what ways might it connect with the 'real world'? And in some contrast with the unalloyed virtues of vocationalism, these 'real world' essays may both conform with but also challenge what employers may suggest are 'real-life' skills.

Essays, even brief one's like Alexander's, are meant to be sustained, focused and coherent arguments that systematically and explicitly evaluate relevant evidence and arguments. They are in themselves a way for students and others to show logically their assessment of evidence and arguments either found independently or provided to them; usually evidence and arguments that are to some degree vital to understanding (some part of) a field of knowledge and practice. That means, crucially, the essay form is used as a way of becoming engaged in however neophyte or limited a way an ongoing debate about evidence, arguments and practices in some field of endeavour.

So Alexander's rhetorical question that supposedly administers the last rites to the essay form can be rephrased in the following way: when, in one's real life (or in a job), would one have to present a sustained, focused and coherent argument about evidence arising from a field of professional endeavour? The answer would be: as soon as a professional moves into a position of responsibility in their field. And the whole point of being a professional is precisely to gain that position of responsibility.

The tolling of the death knell for the essay form becomes absurd if the question is put this way: when would an economist have to provide a coherent essay-like presentation to a board of bankers; a doctor an extended review of procedures for a panel; an architect a focused proposal for a corporate client; a teacher a detailed explanation to staff or parents of curricular and pedagogical choices; a head nurse a rationale for procedural variation; a bureaucrat an elaborate plan for developing or reviewing a policy; and so on, ad infinitum.

Shirley Alexander's contrasting view, presented in a series of dot points (a practice I tend to discourage students from using in essays), is that first-year health care students should work in hospitals; architecture students in architects' offices; engineering students undertake 'real' projects; and so on. As always with this extreme view of the value of on-the-job learning (and assessment) as a type of apprenticeship system (and thereby devaluing the purposes of higher education), one wonders how these students would learn anything new or different or challenge the 'received' wisdom provided by those on-the-job. And it is further implied that in none of these 'real life' on-the-job situations would the essay form of deliberation find any place.

At least in the case of teacher education, Australian governments moved away from the teacher-apprentice system 100 years ago because the lash of imperialist competition meant that time-honoured (read: 'outdated') knowledge and practices were not good enough for nations to survive. Experts were needed to generate expert knowledge and pass it onto the next generation of teachers. That recently some politicians have become deeply suspicious of that expertise and its transmission is less about favouring the virtues of on-the-job apprenticeships and more about fears of an 'over-educated' (read: 'tenaciously enquiring and sceptical') workforce.

Essays, or similarly extended, coherent responses, are precisely about allowing students to enquire at length about both existing and new knowledge and practices in a field and then provide a reasoned and *critical* judgement. It is what professionals do when taking a participatory role in their professions and not just existing as well-trained practitioners without a coherent, logical or evidence-based thought in their heads – and, even if they have, being unable to convey it successfully.

Professor Alexander obviously can convey her thoughts in essay form; she can provide relevant evidence and arguments; she can use this skill to participate in and even lead her field, yet apparently would deny this to fellow professionals.

These 'authentically' trained and assessed professionals, for example, would suture a wound wonderfully, but have no idea whether the health care system, or their part of it, is up-to-date, is functioning optimally, is beneficial for patients and / or staff, can do things differently, and so on. Even if they had some inkling of these issues, they couldn't express their sentiments in any sort of extended, logical, evidence-based, coherent and *critical* way. In other words, they could never participate effectively in, let alone lead, their profession.

Even beyond this broad (but still vocational) value of learning and then practising the fine art of essay writing, there's the value of the essay as a public intervention providing readable (because logical) comment; practical (because evidence-based) investigation; and, at the pinnacle of this, for engaging in political debate. I have my suspicions that the institutionally approved atrophying of the essay form converges with the institutional approval of the atrophying of a willingness to engage with the 'real world' politically.

Thus, in the micro-politics of assessing academic learning with or without essays is encapsulated something of the largest issue confronting academia: the retreat from democratic governance in our institutions. The politics of retreat from promoting the skills of using sustained, logical, evidence-based argument often emanates from the same quarters that have a hankering for arbitrary rule-making (and rule-ignoring) without reference to logic, argument or a wish to engage in sustained debate. From those same managerial quarters, the legitimate and indeed crucial use of the essay form as a means of expression and therefore of assessment is disavowed with arguments that show an unconscious convergence with this retreat from democracy: references to institutionally-generated fears of cheating really being an expression of managerial exasperation at being unable to sweep away student (and staff) rights such as the right not to be placed under super-intrusive surveillance; technocrats confusing narrow and constraining vocational skills and certain types of academic assessment with 'real life'; and the ritual genuflection before 'employer-needs' as the only legitimate justification for academic programs, with those 'needs' usually consisting of lists of 'outcomes' cobbled together, oddly enough, by non-employer technocrats.

Exposing, elaborating, and announcing publicly a sustained and critical argument with logic and evidence is what essays are very good at; and that's what the essay form as academic assessment and professional and political intervention should be all about.

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Reference

Alexander, S. (2014). Buying essays: how to make sure assessment is authentic. *The Conversation*, 12 November. Retrieved from http://theconversation.com/buying-essays-how-to-make-sure-assessment-is-authentic-34125.