**Authentic, creative assessment: the active essay writing project**

**Dr Wendy Garnham, Reader in Psychology**

**Director of Student Experience for the Central Foundation Years at University of Sussex**

I’m going to ask you to cast your minds back, to a time past, when essays ruled the assessment kingdom. Students would sail through the term, eventually arriving at the last week when assessments loomed their heads and the meltdown mountain of panic and last-minute writing would begin. Such essays served little useful purpose for students other than ticking a box to say they had submitted something that related to their learning on the module. Due to the often-rushed nature of how it was completed, students would value the finished product very little, and chances are those essays would never be looked at again. Certainly, the creativity element of them would be minimal and for us as tutors, it would be a case of marking a series of regurgitated lecture material. Authentic assessment? Unlikely!

Fast-forward to 2020 and the arrival of a pandemic. As we shifted to online teaching, the need to re-visit and develop assessment became essential. Thankfully, 2020 didn’t just bring a pandemic, it brought a new approach to essay writing assessment! Along with my colleague Heather Taylor, we have been using and developing an ‘**Active Essay Writing**’ approach on our Psychology modules. This approach embraces opportunities to demonstrate creativity and thinking outside of the box and envelops students in a process of development that sees them complete preparation tasks throughout the term, thereby reducing the stress that used to accompany the last week of term. The finished product, a portfolio rather than a single essay, is something that the students can feel proud of and something that can have value beyond just that single assessment point.

**What does the process look like**? The active essay writing programme requires students to work through five stages of preparation and production. Each stage is designed to take a fortnight to complete. The first stage we call the **Conversation Collage**. Students are able to select a question from a pre-prepared list or create one of their own, related to the module content and are asked to imagine a conversation about that question. What ideas come to mind? What thoughts do they have? If they were in a café, talking to a friend about it, what questions might arise and how might they address them? Students are then given the opportunity to talk to each other about their ideas, in breakout rooms if online, or during in person seminars. They are encouraged to talk to their friends and families outside of teaching time and are actively discouraged from reading any academic material at this point as the emphasis is purely on their creative thinking. We want to prevent their thinking by being dominated by what they have read and instead value their own ideas first.

What do they do with the plethora of ideas they create? They put their creative skills to the test and create **a collage**. This can be done manually, or it can be completed using digital tools. They can use pictures, text, gifs; whatever they want. The finished product is a collage documenting their thinking around the topic. At this point, students are offered the opportunity to obtain peer feedback on their collage. Students are given guidance on how to provide feedback and it encourages students to visit their mark scheme and become familiar with some of the attributes they are working towards.

The second stage is ‘**Sling your hook**’. I’m not going to lie, this is the painful bit. It takes time and time is precious. However, nothing worth working for was ever easy. The task now is for students to use search engines to explore the academic literature with a view to ‘hooking’ evidence onto the ideas they themselves generated. During this fortnight, students are coached in how to use search engines effectively, how to reference what they find and how to extract just what they need from the articles they identify as relevant, generally building their information retrieval and management skills. Thanks to the work completed in stage 1, they can now enter more specific search terms into the search engines than perhaps they would otherwise have done, enabling them to explore the research area much more effectively. The product of stage 2 is an **annotated bibliography** where students document the notes made from the articles they will be using and the associated reference. Once this stage is completed, students are offered the chance to meet with their tutors to get feedback on their choice of research articles, their referencing and use of search engines.

It is possible that they may not be able to find any evidence to support their ideas from stage 1. If this is the case, they may want to either look at how they might use those ideas to create a punchy conclusion or perhaps bin them altogether. These decisions form part of stage 3, the **Geographers Dream**. As the name suggests, it is all about ***mapping*** ideas and evidence into a structure or template. Students are encouraged to try and identify two or three themes from the ideas they have had and found evidence for. Within each theme, is there a balance of argument? Have they just provided evidence that supports an idea, or have they looked at alternative theories or studies that failed to support those ideas? What ideas are they not going to take forward? During the two-week stretch of stage 3 preparation, students are encouraged to use digital tools and active learning exercises in seminars to help them think about the structure and organisation of what they have been working on so far. The product is **a template for an essay**. Feedback is offered from academic success advisors who work with students to help them in understanding the important of structure in academic writing.

By the time students reach stage 4, which is **the essay stage**, they have already engaged in the hard work of preparation, idea generation, research and structure. Actually writing the essay has never been so easy! Using the template, constructed from creative ideas and associated evidence, students can now put the ‘flesh on the bones’ by writing out the essay. The result is a more well considered approach to the question.

Historically, the completion of the essay would be the endpoint of a typical essay-based assessment but no, not in the active writing project. Stage 5 is the **self-reflection stage**, which we regard as a highly life-relevant skill and one which is absent from traditional essay-writing. Students are encouraged to both feed-back and to feed-forward, writing up to 2 paragraphs on each. How did they find the process? Was there anything they found particularly useful or conversely anything they found particularly tough? Given that, what two goals will they take forward to work on in their next assignment? Stage 5 encourages students to see their academic assessment as a stepping-stone in a longer on-going journey rather than a discrete exercise they have to do to just pass a module. As such, it empowers students to not only enrich their understanding of a discipline but also to appreciate the value of assessment in helping them to make steady progress through their degrees and beyond.

At the end of term, students submit their portfolio, containing not just the essay but all of the stages from 1-5 demonstrating their planning and preparation as well as their reflection on the tasks. This not only helps students to see the development of their academic writing skills across time, but it enables what we consider to be a fairer way of marking. If a student has fantastic ideas and is able to identify relevant research and reference this, but their argument doesn’t quite come together in the essay as hoped, they can still be credited for the preparation and planning, and we can then give more targeted feedback in response.

Does this constitute authentic assessment? Personally, I certainly hope so. Students are engaging in a process of creativity, research and reflection that holds value across disciplines and potentially across many different career paths. Rather than simply over-relying on recall and regurgitating lecture material, our students are now submitting work that presents higher-order cognitive challenges, getting us to think as much as them, that provides a diversity of perspectives and that reflects true investment in the task across time. In a world where the academic landscape is changing at a phenomenal rate, that in itself is something to truly value.