

“ ‘Surface Learning’: The Patchwork Text as a Remedy for the Academic Essay”

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It is, as they say, that time of year again: teaching is over and we begin to assess students' attempts to demonstrate that they have learned what they have been taught. And it is the time of year when we are reminded once more that for many of our students 'surface learning' is the game they have chosen to play. 'Surface learning', according to popular writers on Higher Education assessment, is what students do when they try to get an assignment done with minimum effort - listing points without constructing an argument, padding their work with quotations taken out of context and rote-learning material selected in terms of what they think the lecturer wants. Reading their assignments, we realise that many of our students have yet again failed to assimilate the significance of our courses into their own understandings and purposes. Instead they have taken refuge in an attempt to 'play the system' by means of a desperate deceptive ritual, a superficial imitation of the outward form of learning, rather than the real thing. The situation has been described both as a tragedy and a nightmare.

So what is the source of the problem, and what would 'the real thing' look like? A group of staff based at Anglia Polytechnic University and including colleagues at Nottingham Trent University and Cambridge University have just completed a research project in which we substituted a 'Patchwork Text' assignment format for the conventional academic essay.

The problems with the conventional essay are as follows. First, it has to be undertaken at the end of the course, when only a few weeks remain before the deadline for submitting assignments. This time pressure makes it difficult for students not only to create their own sense of the relationships between a variety of new ideas but to embody this new understanding in a written text. So, lacking sufficient time, they panic. Second, given this 'postponement' of the assessed writing task, teaching staff only become aware of students who are finding difficulties with the work when time is short, a problem which is frequently made worse because such students often keep a low profile and 'hope for the best'. Third, in order to maximise the time available to 'do' the essay, students focus on the earlier topics in the course, so that attendance at later sessions drops off, precisely when the overall structure of the course content may start to become clearer. Fourth, the essay requires a specific style of writing, and for many students this particular style is difficult and alien, especially those returning to formal learning after a substantial break and those who are first generation participants in higher education. The essay thus disenfranchises students who may be quite capable of embodying their understanding of ideas in other genres and styles but are not given the opportunity of doing so. Finally, the essay requires the student to adopt the (essentially unrealistic) stance of one who has now, already, after just a few weeks' teaching, 'mastered' a new topic. The essay presents learning as an authoritative 'product', rather than the gradual process by which new learning has been assimilated, through reading, discussion and personal reflection.

So how does the Patchwork Text remedy this? A 'patchwork' is an integrated overall design but it is made up of small segments, each of which is complete in itself. Hence, the key feature of the Patchwork Text assignment is that it consists of a carefully structured series of short pieces of writing, carried out at regular intervals throughout the course. These small-scale writing tasks are varied in style and genre. They may include, for example: a critique of an article, a set of notes on a lecture together with a commentary, detailed and analytical accounts of personal experiences (e.g. a visit, a field-trip, an interview, a classroom activity), a 'poster' representation of the relationship between key ideas, a project proposal and even (with some topics) a poem or a fictional story. Each piece of writing is shared with other students in small working groups of four or five, as the tutor

circulates between the groups, noting the discussions. When the teaching sessions are completed, students submit an overall assignment consisting of their collection of short pieces (edited and perhaps amended) together with a final retrospective commentary. In this commentary they review the relationship between the separate pieces and describe where they feel they now 'stand' in relation to the ideas of the course. In this way they 'stitch the patches together' into a patchwork.

Each of these features of the Patchwork Text explicitly addresses the problems of the academic essay listed above. And the experience of our research project is that almost all students who have undertaken this assignment format experienced very high morale, a satisfying (and often unprecedented) sense of 'ownership' of their learning. Moreover, in one detailed comparison of two cohorts of students, *using intellectual criteria derived from the essay format*, students writing Patchwork Texts scored better than students writing essays according to some criteria and no worse according to any of them. There were fewer failures and fewer marginal passes. And although the best students did well in all the varied writing tasks, the weaker students did better in some than others, suggesting that the Patchwork Text has a genuine potential for widening access to higher education success.