

Fluency in social work essays: A semiotic approach

Robbie Duschinsky¹, Sue Lampitt², and Jamie Thompson³

Abstract: As Paltridge (2004, p.90) has claimed, 'there is no such thing as the one-size-fits-all academic essay that can be written in all areas of study'. Yet research on academic writing by scholars such as Ivanič and Lillis and ideas from social theory offer useful insights, which can be applied to the specific demands of essay-writing on pre-qualifying social work degrees. By failing to clarify how students may succeed, social work educators may misdirect their efforts to improve students' written communication skills or make students feel falsely that they personally are not smart or hard working enough to meet the requirements of higher education. We close the article by proposing 22 unspoken requirements for success in social work essay-writing, and drawing out the implications of our analysis for social work educators.

Keywords: academic writing; fluency; essays; social work education; social theory.

1. Senior Lecturer in Social Science for Social Work, University of Northumbria
2. Senior Lecturer in Social Work, University of Northumbria
3. Principal Lecturer in Learning and Teaching, University of Northumbria)

Address for correspondence: Robert.Duschinsky@Northumbria.ac.uk

Introduction

A study of psychology students by Hartley and Chesworth (2000, pp.21-22) found that students underlined 'difficulties with knowing what was wanted' as the hardest task facing them in their academic writing. Read et al. (2001, p.394) suggest that students often try to 'play it safe' by reproducing the most basic account of the topic from the textbook. Although 'academic writing comprises a complex balance of assertion, caution, and evaluation of existing positions', students in general not told how do to this. Read et al (2001) cite a participant, Kate, who 'felt that she 'didn't know enough' to adopt a bold style, and this inhibited her from achieving first-class grades. Kate informed the researchers:

I think [in a first-class essay] they're just looking for maybe something more from yourself, and I don't really have the confidence to, not so much gamble. I tend to play safe.

The sense that a student is 'playing it safe' in their academic writing also disappoints staff when they believe that someone has much more to say. We identify, with Bernstein (1974), in that what can appear to be a difference in the ability or effort of an individual may be impacted covertly by social inequalities, via the degree of access that individual has had to dominant cultural codes. As Starfield (2004) has documented in the case of first year sociology essays, social inequalities directly impact upon a student's familiarity with academic conventions; they also directly impact upon how equipped students will be to make use of these conventions for example, how to take notes, how to consult indexes, how to phrase an e-mail to ask for help, or how to ask for clarification of a term in a lecture). Observing such effects in the French education system, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977, p.110, p.128) concluded that 'the system demands uniformly of all its students that they should have what it does not give'.

This article sets out to examine the unspoken and contradictory demands we place upon student social workers essay writing. Student social workers may be little supported to learn how to navigate these academic requirements. Social work as a discipline it could be argued is also more complex than more 'pure' social science subjects such as sociology as social work educators require their students to combine an 'academic' analysis with the integration of reflective practice an professional debates about risk and decision making. Given this challenge our methodology will be social theory, reflecting upon and making explicit the demands that we make as social work educators on our students.

Our approach responds to calls from scholars of teaching to utilise theoretical reflection as a method for advancing knowledge of the subject (Kreber 2013). Social theory is a form of social science research which sets out to scrutinise themes relevant to social practice through a conceptual analysis and to 'reveal something of the

meanings and incoherencies with which we live' (Brown, 2010, p.139). Specifically we will be oriented by a 'semiotic' approach, which attempts to conceptualise the relationship of the writer to the language they use. Such an approach is adapted to explore our tacit assumptions about what is expected of a successful student essay in social work.

The sheer contingency, complexity and difficulty of the academic conventions that are often taken to be 'common sense' become quite evident when these points are explicitly written down. We will therefore advance from our semiotic analysis into the elaboration of a set of points which we perceive as the unspoken requirements for success in social work essay-writing. By making these points in an academic article we hope to make them more apparent and available to discussion, critique, and use by all. We believe that our work has strong implications for social work educators – and we draw out some further implications for social work education in the conclusion. This article is, however, also written to help social work students in higher education (and beyond) both with their academic and their professional development. We believe that many – though arguably not all – of our points are substantive: they are not only strategies for playing the academic game but also means of facilitating and demonstrating writing skills needed for future practice. For, as Munro (2011, p.111) notes, 'recording is a key social work task and its centrality to the protection of children cannot be over-estimated.' In this way we embrace both the pragmatic and critical approaches to English for academic purposes (Harwood & Hadley, 2004).

Contradictory demands

Reflecting on Wittgenstein's remarks on education, Cavell (1999, p.125) considers situations in which 'I may find my answers thin, I may feel I run out of reasons'. We find this is an apt characterisation of our experience giving feedback on student scripts in trying, for example, to explain:

- what 'analysis' is;
- precisely the requirements for crossing from an upper second to a first class mark;
- how to be more 'explicit' in making an 'argument';
- how to introduce in a discussion of ethics and values;
- which terms from policy and practice require definition and which do not;
- how to identify and evaluate the evidence upon which practice has been justified.

Cavell continues that, in such situations where it is unclear to us how to justify the way we are educating, 'I may feel that my foregone conclusions were never

conclusions I arrived at, but were merely imbibed by me, merely conventional. I may blunt that recognition through hypocrisy or cynicism or bullying. But I may take the occasion to throw myself back on my culture, and ask why we do what we do, judge as we judge.' Cavell identified four paths the marker may take. In three, the marker places responsibility for achieving fluency with essay-writing conventions on the student.

A *first path* takes the hypocritical (or 'power blind') form of telling the student that, for example, which terms need definitions and which ones do not is simply 'common sense', although the marker may have had opportunity to learn these conventions over their own lengthy exposure to academic study.

The *second path* takes the form of cynicism, explaining that the conventions are simply a game, that the student must learn to play holding no particular meaning in themselves (the student is asked to mimic rather than learn).

A *third path* takes the form of a bullying (or at best unreflective) approach, applying psychological pressure on the student to write in a fluent way – 'be more explicit here!' – without further explanation of how to do so. This bullying becomes more poignant, in light of analyses such as Lillis (1999, p.130), which shows the ambiguity of the academic vocabulary that we take for granted. For instance, Lillis notes that the concept 'explicitness' in this academic context can mean defining technical terms, linking paragraphs together or tying claims back to the question (Lillis 1999). However, we need not be hypocritical, cynical or bullying in the ways we advise students how to do this.

Cavell also identifies a *fourth path*, which requires our recognition that we did not ourselves arrive at the conclusions we see as foregone. The full implications of this position are unsettling. We take for granted academic language as the medium through which a student expresses their knowledge, and through which we assess and support their learning. However academic language is not simply a transparent expression of our thoughts; it is a set of conventions that we have learnt to navigate and to take for granted (Derrida, 1998; Foucault, 1986). Here we agree with Turner (1999, pp.149-150), who suggests that 'when language is working well, it is invisible. Conversely, however, when language becomes 'visible', it is an object of censure, marking a deficiency in the individual using it'. This way of framing particular individuals as successful or unsuccessful students is particularly problematic because the means of production of 'fluent' language are unequally distributed along the lines of class, ethnicity and gender.

Social work students receive very limited explicit instruction from us in achieving access to such codes. For instance, when we teach the topic of social work values, we offer little support for students in learning how to make the kind of value-based claims that our marking will reward. For example we mark essays that call for social workers to 'empower service users, so as to improve their well-being'. Words like 'empower' and 'well-being' here translate vague good intentions into the required social work essay conventions. It allows the student to claim that social work betters

and opens up the lives of service users, without specifying how or why. Students may be awarded higher marks if they convey to the marker that their use of the required vocabulary to talk about ethics is not empty, and has been the subject of personal reflection. Higher marks still are available for those students that draw out how principles which sit together cleanly on paper can conflict in practice. It is telling that the latter involves recognition of the fact that the language of social work ethics is a set of conventions, to be navigated, reflected upon and made one's own.

Students are expected – without being explicitly asked – to present the different positions on an issue, and balance analysis and evaluation of these as they move towards a distinctive position. Whilst presenting this distinctive 'argument', social work students should also continually signal to the reader that they recognise themselves to be 'apprentices' in higher education and the social work profession. For example, they must define terms that no longer require definition in the academic literature. As Casanave (2002, pp.xii-xiv) has identified more generally, academic writers 'do not write in isolation but within networks of more and less powerfully situated colleagues and community members.' Seen in this light, the social work essay does not simply support learning and assessment but is a *ritualised depiction* of the student's position within social work education itself. The written voice of a successful social work essay navigates, in an exaggerated way that is easy for the marker to recognise (as a learner driver exaggerates a glance in the rear view mirror) the contradictory demands on a social work student. They must credibly demonstrate the proficiency and capability for professional entry, but also demonstrate apprenticeship within higher education and the social work profession.

Recognition of this taken-for-granted demand allows us to make sense of the ambiguity, noted but not explained by Coffin et al. (2003), in the term 'argument' in the feedback students receive. The demand for 'argument' both embodies and covers over the rather contradictory demands faced by the student, who must find their own position on an issue only through the analysis and evaluation of the evidence presented for the pre-existing positions of scholars, policy-makers and practitioners:

In some instances lecturers use 'argument' almost synonymously with the organisational structure of the text type – which section should come first, second, etc. It is also used to emphasise the linking of ideas at a 'local' or sentence and paragraph level... the notion of argument is also used when lecturers demand that students provide greater referencing to source material both to 'prove' a particular point and to demonstrate understanding. Argument may also mean a perspective, a position or stance on something (Coffin et al. ,2003, p.25).

The term argument embodies these contradictions by meaning several different things at once; it covers over these contradictions by making it seem to the student and the marker that a single feature is either present or absent in the essay.

A study by Hounsell (1997) found that students who believed that their essays

should present their 'viewpoint' received lower marks than students who believed their goal should be making an 'argument'. To the degree that this logic is also operative within social work education, the student who wishes to write a successful social work essay must pretend to accept a fiction that their fortnight of reading can confer the capacity and authority to weigh up the evidence and present not a summary but a determinate opinion on the topic. The student is required (though not generally told) to set sail on a sea of other people's words, finding their own voice through the appropriation of a *genre* of texts addressing the topic. They must also recognise that different texts in this genre compete with one another to some degree. The student is required (though not generally told) to become so absorbed by the academic approaches to the topic under discussion that they themselves become able to generate further forms of this particular academic language. They must again balance this with display of their position as apprentices within higher education and the social work profession. They must not, on fear of strict penalty, appropriate a single text directly without quotation marks (Chandrasoma et al., 2004). That would be 'plagiarism', and drive questions about their professional suitability (General Social Care Council [GSCC] 2007).

The injunction on students to learn referencing conventions therefore occludes but also encapsulates the broader semiotic position of the student in higher education, who 'owns the process of inventing, but not the discourse which is the raw material for the invention' (Ivanič, 1998, p.141). As a marker of the student's emersion within academic convention, the student's argument needs to be asserted in the third person ('it can, therefore, be suggested that...'). First person reflections ('Against my expectations, I have found that ...') reflections risk being penalised in anything other than practice-placement experience, where, of course, they will be penalised if they are absent.

Bartholomae (1985, p.134) expresses this predicament well when he writes that

the student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialised discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably at one with his audience ... whilst finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other.

The student is faced, therefore, with partially contradicting imperatives. Learning discursive strategies to manage these, Womack (1993, p.43) has identified,

prepares the student writer, not for the accomplishment of any particular task, but for membership of that idealised bourgeois public sphere in which disparate private subjects interact harmoniously on the basis of ... reasonableness.

This general point is refracted in a curious way by the social work essay. The conventional marking guidelines for contemporary social work essays demand that

the student, for example, 'show a clear audit trail of reasoning' and make 'evidence-based arguments'. The social work student should not be regarded as in training to become just any member of the bourgeois public sphere, but to effectively justify their *professional* activity, including their exercise of the particular forms of professional power that characterise social work. Such justifications are needed both in the day-to-day operation of social work practice, such as care planning meetings, and on a wider scale in the face of calls for accountability and political attacks on the profession.

22 Points for Success!

Lillis (1997, p.187) has asked that efforts to make essay writing conventions explicit are fundamental if the student-outsider is to be enabled to 'learn the rules of the game' and participate on an equal footing in higher education as currently organised.' Yet Haugaard (2002, p.226) has expressed a concern that making the signs of academic success more explicit, only places success in reach for those whose class background, ethnicity and gender already confer some knowledge of essay-writing strategies and the cultural confidence to deploy them. We feel that this danger is *less immediate* than the problems produced by leaving tacit the demands we are making of our students.

Based upon our studies of the literature we offer 22 strategies for writing a successful social work essay, with the goal of making these available for consultation, discussion and critique by students and social work educators. These strategies are written purposely to speak directly to social work students.

The Question

1. All questions you are given are set because a particular topic is seen as relevant to the profession. Try to figure out what the core 'stakes' are in the question, why it is significant and to whom.
2. Because of the professional context in which social work is practiced every question will raise issues relating to social work ethics. Print off a copy of the HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics (2012) and find things that are relevant to the essay. Invoking these standards is satisfactory. Much better, find *conflicts within or between different principles* that relate to your topic. So, for example, what are the conflicts between protecting someone's confidentiality and protecting them from other kinds of harm? Show that you can grapple with how complex, ambiguous and multi-dimensional things can be. For instance,

avoid empty ethical claims such as ‘empowerment is good for service-users as it will improve their well-being’. Look up academic articles that critically analyse such woolly terms as diversity, abusive, power, safeguarding, enabling, responsibility, harm, well-being, anti-oppressive, support, risk. Seek discussion from service-users regarding what such terms mean to them.

3. As we explored earlier, you are expected to find your own position on an issue *through* the analysis and evaluation of the evidence you find about the pre-existing positions of scholars, policy-makers and practitioners. So, you might be asked ‘What is a social worker?’ The implicit context is both the history of recognition of social work as a profession *and* contemporary issues such as the changing social work role in the context of the cuts, the personalisation agenda, and the emerging College of Social Work. If whoever sets the question has not done this for you, you will need to re-pose the question in a way that it can be rigorously explored: ‘Policy and practice suggest three different overarching models of what a social worker is. Identify and evaluate these’. You would then critically consider each of these models in turn, synthesising a position of your own from this discussion.

Reading

4. Textbooks and other summary texts (e.g. Learning Matters) give the basics. However, they should only be a starting point. Explore recent peer-review articles and academic books – on and beyond your reading list. Avoid internet sources or newspaper articles in favour of reliable academic texts and research.
5. Make notes selectively. Do not copy out large chunks of text. Avoid accidental plagiarism by placing quotation marks around any text that you do copy verbatim into your notes. Note page numbers in case you want to revisit tricky points. The key is processing the information, learning to think and reason in the language of the specific aspect of the topic. Look especially for disagreements between different texts on issues relevant to your question.
6. Be tactical in choosing which texts to read, and what chapters of books, deciding how best to deploy the available time. Examine very recent peer-reviewed journal articles that address the question; not only will they make the essay current, but they may indicate which bits of the previous literature are relevant.

Structure

7. Carefully plan the steps in your argument in order to structure your essay. This

can then be used to ensure that each section of your essay, each paragraph, and each sentence proceeds in a logical way; this will help make the essay cumulative, each point building directly on the one before.

8. Make a first set of notes towards a plan when you first sees the question, the marking criteria and the learning outcomes; as you read, this plan should be continually added to, pruned and otherwise edited until it fully addresses the question.
9. Number the points in your plan, to help you keep a tight focus on the question and knit different elements together. If you get stuck here, imagine that you have to explain the issues to a friend, in what order would you present your points? Your essay should build step-by-step towards a conclusion like a *tower of building-blocks*. Budget a certain number of words for each section from your overall word limit, and stay within this. Then remove these numbered points when you write up – the text should flow as a sequence of paragraphs rather than a list. You can use systemising language, however, to help the reader *see* how structured your thinking has been and follow your reasoning e.g. ‘firstly...’ ‘on the one hand ...’, ‘... this would suggest three main reasons why...’.

Planning

10. The first of your numbered points should be the introduction. This should include the following five elements:
 - a. Set out the topic you are addressing in a way that does not simply repeat the learning outcomes, but rather gets to grip with *why* and *how* the topic has become an ‘object for thought’ and debate relevant to social work.
 - b. The different ways that it is *currently* framed by academics and policy-makers. Draw out the theoretical perspective that orients each: for example, a feminist perspective, a strengths-based approach, a neo-liberal ideology, classical or contemporary attachment theory, stages of grief approach etc.
 - c. The argument you will make in evaluating and synthesising these perspectives: for example, ‘Though scholars are split on the issue, greater conceptual clarity will suggest a synthesis of these positions with strong practice implications’.
 - d. *How* you will do this: for example, ‘This essay will critically consider the evidence-base drawn upon by policy-makers/leading academics on the issue of domestic violence’; or ‘This essay will analyse and evaluate ambiguities in the key concepts which have been used to address the issue of inter-professional working’.
 - e. The practical and ethical stakes for social work if you are right. If there

would be no difference, then you are not yet making an ‘argument’.

11. A second set of numbered points should set out the different authoritative positions on the issue in question, and note the stakes if one is right as opposed to others. Consider:
 - a. What assumptions are present in the key terms of the debate; you could ask yourself ‘what *different* things do policy-makers mean by the term ... collaboration?’ If relevant, include in your plan some consideration of the contested meaning of key *concepts*: do you think everyone is talking about things in the same way, even if they are using the same words (for example, ‘the family’)?
 - b. Ensure that your written ‘voice’ does not become lost when summarising other people: carefully spar with the material under discussion. You can do this by using qualifying terms such as ‘convincing’, though you must also explain on what basis you find it ‘convincing’: for example, ‘their study has been replicated by other scholars, suggesting the robustness of their findings’; ‘The general argument of Brandon and Prichard (2011) regarding the different potential meanings of disability is persuasive, in that... However, it can be qualified that these authors perhaps should not presume that.... The experiences of service-users, suggest that...’
12. Another set of numbered points should then evaluate the relative validity of these positions e.g.:
 - a. What evidence they present, and how strong it is;
 - b. What concepts they use, and how precise and useful these concepts are for the task in hand.
 - c. Consider evidence or policy that points in a new directions beyond the established positions: ‘Crittenden’s research on maltreated infants can be used to qualify Ainsworth’s division of attachment into three types, since this division which was based on a middle-class non-clinical sample.’
 - d. What do the experiences of service-users suggest?
13. The next part of the plan is the most important – and is so often skipped by students as they are not told that it is required! A tutor cited by Creme and Lea (2008, p.30) states that ‘Students ... learn to put one theory followed by another one and then end up by saying that they don’t know the answer. This is a typical 2.2 answer which is limited in its scope of the real grasp of the argument’.
 - a. Without bringing in new information, you need to then synthesise the perspectives and evidence you have considered. This means that you need to draw from what you have said so far *a conclusion about the key causal factors in play* (are there three? Or four? *How did you decide this?*), and use these to make a direct answer to the question and address the learning outcomes.

- b. Most markers will be delighted to see a diagram showing your *synthesis* of the perspectives and theory you have surveyed – so long as you explain it. Try a flow diagram, with arrows showing causal mechanisms.
 - c. Having achieved this synthesis, you should be ready to write a strong, but defensible, introduction to your essay: e.g. 'This essay will argue that there are four fundamental reasons for the shift in government policy: two economic, one social and one political.'
14. A final point of the plan (which will be the conclusion) should draw out the concrete implications of your position. If you are right, then what? What further research might be helpful on the topic? In the conclusion, also note to the reader (and here you can use 'I' rather than 'this essay') how the reading you have done on this topic has shifted your ways of approaching things.

Writing

15. Paragraphs are the building-blocks of your essay. Each should make a single key point, building upon the previous paragraph and setting up the next one; if you were to take out a paragraph from a completed essay then the next should not make sense.
- a. Aim for 4-8 sentences in each paragraph.
 - b. The first sentence should present the central idea and make a link to the point made in the previous paragraph (except where this is obvious).
 - c. The next should add to the first idea – presenting evidence or further explanation concerning reasons or mechanisms for processes, e.g. 'Having explored classical attachment theory above, it is now possible to examine the direction taken by subsequent attachment theorists';
 - d. The paragraph should close with a line to clinch the point, drawing things together and helping your argument flow between the paragraphs.
16. A 'signpost' is a bit of explanation that helps the reader see the direction of your argument, and how you will go about getting there. The introduction is the primary form of signposting in your essay. But the start and end of key paragraphs, where you clinch points, can also be a good place for further signposting: for example, 'Having established in theory that ... this claim can be further supported through the consideration of a case study, chosen to emphasise that...'
17. Rather than writing 'I would argue', use the 'passive voice'. This is a grammatical construction which removes 'I' whilst still making a distinct claim: 'This essay will contend that ... , based on the evidence of sociological ... ' However, it can be

noted that in practice... , based on interviews with ‘front line’ social workers...’

18. Link your account to relevant theory. Theory is an *explanation which looks at particular cases in the context of wider patterns*: for example, ‘The dynamics in the team could be understood as part of the broader tendency towards New Managerialism since...’
19. When making evidence based arguments, do not just inform the reader that ‘studies suggest that...’. Specify: 1) who did the research, 2) what *evidence* they offer in favour of their conclusion, 3) how this evidence makes a contribution e.g. runs counter to a theory, adds support to a theory, 4) the implications of these findings for your argument e.g. how the evidence might impact on your view of a situation, allow you to see what was happening differently.
20. The more analytical you can be in each of your stages the higher the marks you will achieve. Key vocabulary here will be concepts like ‘cause’, ‘therefore’, ‘because’, ‘in fact’, ‘however’, ‘combines’, ‘consequently’, ‘means’, ‘distinguish’, ‘alternatively’, ‘so that’, ‘nevertheless’, ‘similarly’, etc. Use systemising language e.g. ‘challenging this perspective’, ‘developing this perspective’, ‘this leaves unanswered’, ‘a further implication is that’, ‘whilst this perspective’, ‘these findings run counter to...’
21. When you are finished, print off a copy, and read it through with a pen/pencil in hand. Look for errors in your writing, but also in the logical flow of your argument. Then make changes to the essay. Next, send the essay to someone to proof-read before you submit it.
22. Always collect your feedback! When you receive feedback add it to a document of things to improve. Draw up a plan to address or seek help to address each of these points. Consider them carefully in writing your next piece.

Conclusions and implications for social work education

We suggest that discussion of our 22 points above has value for the design of learning, teaching and assessment in social work education. We believe that some – though probably not all of the skills necessary in order to achieve a successful social work essay, such as planning skills and clarity of written expression, are not only arbitrary conventions to which social inequalities allow students differential degrees of access. To write accurately and clearly in styles adapted to the audience, purpose and context of the communication’ (Quality Assurance Agency ,2008, 5.6) and maintain records that are ‘accurate, comprehensible, succinct and timely’ (The

College of Social Work 2012, 7.8) are necessary for future social work practitioners.

We have not approached this subject from a cynical stance, although we can see the journey to and from that position and have sometimes travelled in that direction ourselves. We do, however, recognise that the, often tacit, demands we make of students can be complex and contradictory, can exclude students who have less access to the means of production of fluent academic writing and confuse those who do. Our 22 Points for Success represent an attempt to be transparent (and helpful) to ourselves and to students about the complex particularity of fluent academic writing on a social work programme. For so long as such a rubric has relevance in terms of students' academic marks (and this is offered for debate) then this transparency seems right to us. We recognise Haugaard's (2002) concern that making these codes explicit may reinforce them, facilitating cynical pedagogic strategies. Yet every power-relation is risky, and we must ask: what is the most pressing danger? To us it is that students are being assessed and assessing themselves as lacking capability when part of the reason for this lies beyond them, in the unclear and contradictory demands made on academic writing.

Successful social work students must demonstrate that they are becoming professionally competent at the same time as being academically fluent. It is important that we offer transparent connections between these two objectives, and between the different sources of authority, rubrics and codifications that underpin them. To take a simple but pertinent example as educators we need to find ways to describe the relationship between the ability to write a fluent academic essay and develop students' abilities to write effective professional reports. Some aspects of this may be more obvious than others. There may be a shared expectation that both should offer a high standard of presentation, are easy for the reader to understand, identify sources of evidence and contain some analysis of the information offered. The writing style required may, however, be very different, more or less reflective/descriptive/analytical and with more or less explicit references to social work values and theories. It will be important then that we do not deceive ourselves into believing that these two activities can map exactly onto each other, and we owe it to our students to be able to articulate how they do.

We need to reflect on how can we reshape the demands we make of students, focusing their learning in a way that aligns academic and professional development. Our goal should be the construction of a relevant and varied teaching and assessment strategy across social work education that accommodates and contextualises the development of academic fluency. If we set 'essays', we should not leave our students to decode what we expect to see in the answer. Short-answer assignments, case study analyses and first year viva interviews are three examples of our current attempts to assess academic curricula in relevant ways. Through these we have been confident that knowledge and understanding, critical facility and authentic communication have been facilitated and tested. These all represent forms of assessment that sit outside of a traditional essay writing rubric, and which have been framed for students

in terms of: explicit connections to the learning opportunities offered; explicit criteria for marking; and explicit alignment between academic and professional development.

The academic essay can be (and indeed routinely is) put into the context of a richer and varied assessment diet – but it remains. It remains because universities are oriented towards the delivery of higher education and not training, and the fluent essay is still the *lingua franca* of that distinction. In this way our discussion of the unspoken demands on academic writing in social work essays points to further reaching and pressing questions. With massification and commercialism in UK Higher Education has come a different power balance between stakeholders. Competition for numbers, greatly increased fees and a burgeoning customer culture underpinned by the National Student Survey has given students increased consumer power. Competition between universities for teaching contracts and the proliferation of accreditation processes have seen a steady growth in the influence of employers and professional bodies to influence curricula. The viability of universities increasingly seems to depend on their responsiveness and flexibility in relation to this changing climate and their cartel of degree-awarding powers. Will the currency of the undergraduate degree remain unchallenged in professional spheres such as social work? To fail to continuously consider what distinguish ‘graduateness’ from training will be to undermine that currency. To remain unaware or unresponsive to critiques of potentially punitive processes like the academic essay will be to risk the credibility of universities as the best environments in which social workers are prepared for practice. Yet such debate will also help re-establish our legitimacy – beyond the traditional forms of academic domination that facilitate hypocritical, cynical or bullying approaches to teaching – rather in terms of a critical and innovative professional growth and development which can best be achieved within the context of higher education.

References

- Bartholomae, D. (1985) *Inventing the University*. in M. Rose (Ed.) *When a Writer Can't Write*. New York: Guilford (pp.134-165)
- Bernstein, B. (1974) Social class, language and socialisation. in *Class, Codes and Control*, Volume 1, London: Routledge, (pp.170-189)
- Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.-C. (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Brown, W. (2010) *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. New York: Zone Books.
- Casanave, C.P. (2002) *Writing games*, Mahwah, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum.
- Cavell, S. (1999) *The Claim of Reason*. (2nd ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Chandrasoma, R., Thompson, C., and Pennycook. A. (2004) Beyond plagiarism. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 3, 3, 171-193

- Coffin, C., Curry, M.J., Goodman, S., Hewings, A., Lillis, T.M., and Swann, J. (2003) *Teaching Academic Writing*. London: Routledge
- Derrida, J. (1998) *Monolingualism of the Other*. (trans. P. Mensah) Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Foucault, M. (1966/1998) Thought of the outside. in J.D. Faubion (Ed.) *Aesthetics: Essential works*. Harmondsworth: Penguin (pp.147-170)
- Hartley, J. and Chesworth, K. (2000) Qualitative and quantitative methods in research on essay writing: No one way. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 24, 1, 15-24
- Harwood, N., and Hadley, G. (2004) Demystifying institutional practices. *English for Specific Purposes* 23, 4, 355-377
- Haugaard, M. (2002) *Power: A reader*. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Health and Care Professions Council (2012) *Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics*. <http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutregistration/standards/standardsofconductperformanceandethics/index.asp>
- Hounsell, D. (2005) Contrasting conceptions of essay-writing. in F. Marton, D. Hounsell, and N. Entwistle Eds.) *The Experience of Learning: Implications for teaching and studying in higher education*. (2nd ed.) Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Assessment (pp.106-125)
- Ivanič, R. (1998) *Writing and Identity: The discursual construction of identity in academic writing*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins
- Kreber, C. (2013) *Authenticity in and through Teaching*. London: Routledge
- Lillis, T. (1997) New voices in academia? The regulative nature of academic writing conventions. *Language in Education*, 11, 3, 182-199
- Lillis, T. (1999) 'Whose 'common sense?' Essayist literacy and the institutional practice of mystery. in Cary Jones, Joan Turner and Brian Street (Eds.) *Students Writing in the University: Cultural and epistemological issues*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins
- Munro, E. (2011) *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report*. London: Department of Education.
- Paltridge, B. (2004) Academic Writing. *Language Teaching*, 37, 87-105
- Quality Assurance Agency (2008) *Benchmark Statement*. accessed at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Documents/socialwork08.pdf>
- Read, B., Francis, B., and Robson, J. (2001) "Playing Safe": Undergraduate Essay Writing and the Presentation of the Student "Voice", *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22, 3, 387-399
- Starfield, S. (2004) Word power. in L. Ravelli and R. Ellis (Eds.) *Analyzing Academic Writing: Contextualised frameworks*. London: Continuum (pp.66-83)
- Turner, J. (1999) Academic literacy and the discourse of transparency. in C. Jones, J. Turner and B. Street (Eds.) *Students Writing in the University: Cultural and epistemological issues*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins
- Womack, P. (1993) 'What are essays for?' *English in Education*, 27, 2, 42-49