



ASSIGNMENT COVER PAGE

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Unit Code: EDUC 45005

Unit Name: The University Culture

Assignment Title: Many first-year university students experience difficulty in the writing of essays, claiming inadequate preparation during their high-school years. Briefly critique this claim and suggest what students might do to resolve their essay-writing difficulties.

Due Date: 15th April, 2014Date of Submission: 6th March, 2014

Extension Details (if applicable):

Word Length (excluding list of references): 2253 (Includes headings)

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By checking the box below I certify that this assignment is my own work and is free from plagiarism. I understand that the assignment may be checked for plagiarism by electronic or other means and may be transferred and stored in a database for the purposes of data-matching to help detect plagiarism. The assignment has not previously been submitted for assessment in any other unit or to any other institution. **I have read and understood** Avondale's Academic Integrity Policy.

Agree Date: 6th March, 2014

Abstract

This paper investigated the claim made by some first-year university students that their high schools failed to prepare them adequately to write an academic essay. It focused on two school factors that are often cited as contributing to the problem: falling literacy levels among teachers and the practice of teaching to the test. The paper found that, at most, the high school is only partly responsible for any essay-writing difficulties among first-year university students because of the many non-school factors that also contribute to the problem, not the least significant of which is the role played by the students themselves. Addressing an imaginary first-year university student, Rania, the paper went on to suggest that she can overcome her essay-writing difficulties by actively engaging with the academic culture and life of her university – an engagement that should be proactively supported and encouraged by the university itself – and by realising that the basic purpose of the university is to encourage students to become independent, critical thinkers with well-reasoned opinions of their own, a purpose that inspires the university essay.

Comment [I1]: This is the principal thesis statement.

Comment [I2]: This is a secondary thesis of the essay as it is a critical aspect of the solution to the essay-writing difficulties faced by first-year students.

Author's Note

This essay-writing model has been prepared as a guide for students who may not yet have written a college essay, or who are unsure how to go about writing a university-style essay and how to set it out. The model is based on the APA format. Please understand that there are alternative formats in use at Avondale, such as Turabian and MLA. Consult your lecturer about his or her preferred format for your essays. The use of headings within an essay (as in this model) is not common to all essays, and you should consult with your lecturer about whether headings are required or not, and how they should be formatted if they are required. If you do use headings, be careful that you use them for their intended purpose which is to help your readers navigate your text. Do not use them as a means to impose structure on your essay; the flow and structure of your essay should be obvious without the headings.

A critique of the claim that high schools do not adequately prepare students for university essay writing, and suggestions how students might remedy their essay-writing difficulties.

First-year university students frequently experience difficulty in the writing of essays, many of them claiming that they received inadequate essay-writing preparation in high school. This paper critiques this claim and finds that, at most, the high school is only partly responsible for this difficulty because of the many non-school factors that also contribute to the problem, not the least significant of which is the role played by the students themselves. The essay goes on to emphasise the critical importance for first-year students to actively engage with their study programs, an engagement which will positively affect their academic success, and with that their academic writing. The need for the university to proactively encourage and support such engagement is emphasised. Differences between the high-school essay and the university essay are briefly described, and the link between the university essay and the purpose of the university to encourage students to become critical, independent thinkers with an ability to present well-reasoned arguments, is stressed.

Investigation of the Essay-writing Claim

Let us follow the experience of an imaginary first-year Avondale student, Rania, who is struggling to write her first college essay because, as she says, “my high school did not prepare me for writing a university essay.” There is some truth in this claim and commentators identify various school-based factors that contribute to the problem, two of which are frequently cited: the falling literacy levels of teachers and the need for students to sit external exams such as the HSC.

Concern about Literacy Levels

Concern about the literacy levels of some Australian teachers is not new. For example, in 1984 the Western Australian Beazley Report “recommended that the literacy standards of teachers be improved” (Watts, 1991, p. 24). Watts went on to say that the problem is circular because when graduate teachers have poor language skills “they cannot be held responsible when the products of their teaching return equally deficient” (p. 24). More recently, Dr Russell Marks (2012) of La Trobe University wrote that “a majority of 18-year-olds who enrol in most first-year humanities subjects are unable to reliably construct a simple sentence” (para. 4). Dr Marks also commented on the circular nature of the problem, saying that

[t]he problem is deepening.... And the scores a year-12 student needs to get into a teaching degree are not high. So then we consign the next generation of children to be taught by twenty-somethings whose own literacy skills are mediocre at best. (2012, para. 12)

Comment [13]: The introduction begins by identifying the focus of the essay and providing essential context. It then lists the main sections/points the essay will cover, doing so in the order that these will appear in the paper, and usually concludes with a thesis statement (if one is required, and it usually is). However, please note that the thesis statement can appear earlier in the introduction, as it does in this instance.

Comment [14]: This is the thesis statement.

Comment [15]: You may or may not be required to use headings in your paper. Check with your lecturer. If you do use headings, use them sparingly. This is a **Level 1 Heading**. It comes at the start of a new section. It is centred and is in **Bold Type** and all the principal words begin with a capital. The purpose of headings is to facilitate the reading of your paper; they must NOT be used to impose structure on an essay. The structure and flow of your essay should be obvious without headings.

Comment [16]: This comment is in quotation marks as it is a direct quote.

Comment [17]: This heading is **Level 2**. It is left justified and is in **Bold Type** and all the principal words begin with a capital.

Comment [18]: This is an example of the most common form of in-text citation, and includes author’s surname, date and page number (if available). Note that there is a space before the number 24. The quote from Watts is in quotation marks as it is a direct quote. The author’s surname, the date, and page number are enclosed within brackets.

Comment [19]: Here the author’s name appears in the sentence and therefore does not appear in the brackets at the end of the sentence. Also, the date does not appear in the brackets because it is obvious from the context that the date is 2012 as shown by the previous citation. The page number (p. 24) is given because the APA style requires the page number (if available) to be included each time a direct quote appears in your essay.

Comment [10]: The word *the* was written as *The* in the original. It has been changed to *the* to maintain grammatical correctness in its new context. As only the *T* was changed to its lower-case form, it has been placed within square brackets to indicate that change.

Comment [11]: This is a block quote and is used for direct quotes of 40 words or more. It is inset from the left margin by the same amount as the first line of a paragraph. Do NOT use quotation marks. The final full stop comes before the date and page details. In this case the web edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald* does not have page numbers and the paragraph number is given instead.

The falling literacy levels of teachers will have a negative impact on the literacy levels of their students and the high school should accept some responsibility for this. However, there are two significant factors that reduce this responsibility. Firstly, the acquiring of literacy skills does not depend only on the quality of the teaching in the schools because “much of the literate activity done by school-aged children is conducted out of school” (Freebody, 2007, p. 69). The home is central in this activity and there is much research that emphasises the key role of parents. Sargent, Hill and Morrison (as cited by Lowe, Martens, & Hannett, 2009) wrote that parents’ “attitudes towards reading exert a *profound* [emphasis added] impact on children’s literacy development” (p. 3). The long-term impact of this influence was noted by Waldfogel (2012) who said that “parents ... affect literacy skills not only before children begin school but also afterward” (p. 41). Perhaps Rania did not enjoy a home environment that modelled and fostered literacy acquisition, especially during her early years when her literacy foundation was being established.

Secondly, and very importantly, students themselves play a critical role in their own literacy development. Students who actively engage in study – that is, they have a positive attitude towards their learning and take ownership of it – tend to be or to become competent readers. This is significant as reading competency feeds literacy competency. Furthermore, “research findings ... consistently show a strong correlation between reading proficiency and academic success at all ages, from the primary school ... to university level” (Pretorius, 2000, p. 35). Elsewhere, Pretorius (2002) wrote that “reading constitutes the very process whereby learning occurs” (p. 193). If Rania’s reading competency is not what it should be, she need not despair because she can redeem her situation as we will observe later.

The Need for Students to Sit External Exams

The second school-based factor that is cited as contributing to students’ reduced ability to write an academic essay is the need to prepare students to sit external exams such as the HSC. When teachers place too much emphasis on such preparation it is called “teaching to the test”, a practice that Kathy Mills of Queensland University of Technology said “replaces intellectually challenging instruction and critical thinking with rote learning” (Mills, 2008, p. 213, citing Groves, 2002, and Gunzenhauser, 2003). When we consider that a fundamental purpose of university education is to encourage students to become independent, critical thinkers with well-reasoned opinions of their own, we can see how a test-driven style of teaching might compromise this purpose and thereby also compromise a student’s ability to write an acceptable academic essay. An academic essay, at the very least, will reflect critical thinking and reasoned opinion.

Comment [I12]: Always include the page number (if available) for a direct quote. It is usually placed directly after the quote.

Comment [I13]: This in-text citation is a little different from regular citations (such as the Watts citation, Comment 8). In this case the statement attributed to Sargent, Hill and Morrison, was found in a secondary source, Lowe, Martens and Hannett, (2009). Therefore the work by Lowe et al. is the only one of these two to appear in the reference list at the end of the essay.

Comment [I14]: When quoting this statement by Sargent et al., I italicised the word *profound* because I wished to stress it. To indicate this, I included, in square brackets, the term “emphasis added”.

Comment [I15]: The ellipsis (...) is used to indicate that one or more words in the original quote have been left out here in order to make the quote flow more naturally. If ever you do this, be careful not to misrepresent the original quote in any way. Also, make sure that your treatment of the quote results in a sentence that is grammatically sound.

Comment [I16]: Another Level 2 Heading.

Teaching to the test can be positive. A study into the practice of teaching to the test, specifically the HSC, by Ayres, Dinham and Sawyer (1999) in 32 NSW schools found that half the lessons observed were dominated by the HSC. However, the teachers of the other observed lessons, while mindful of the HSC, did not let it dominate their teaching, but focused on helping students to understand the material. “[W]e often teach *beyond* [emphasis added] the HSC ... to aid their understanding” (p. 2), one teacher said in a post-lesson interview. This study confirms that teaching to the test is not necessarily negative and that there are many high-school teachers for whom teaching “beyond the HSC” is an opportunity to empower students to think.

Comment [I17]: This heading is **Level 3**. It is the opening sentence of the paragraph and is in **Bold Type**. Only the first word begins with a capital (and also any proper nouns if there are any).

Comment [I18]: Again, note the use of square brackets to indicate changed or added material.

Rania’s Claim Assessed

Is Rania’s claim credible? Did her high school let her down by not helping to raise her literacy levels or by failing to provide sufficient practice in critical and higher-order thinking? When we consider that teaching and learning are influenced by a wide range of factors both within and outside the school, including in particular the part played by the learners themselves, it is difficult to identify a specific cause for a specific educational outcome or deficit. This certainly applies to Rania’s literacy level because of the many school, family, and personal factors that contributed to it. And if a narrow teaching to the test might have given Rania limited scope to develop her higher-order thinking skills, we need to balance this against the finding that many teachers teach beyond the test in ways that foster understanding and encourage higher-order thinking. Thus the most satisfactory conclusion we can reach about who or what is responsible for Rania’s essay-writing difficulties is that the high school, at most, is only partly responsible. Beyond that it is pointless to speculate. What is much more useful to Rania is that she assume responsibility for her situation, that she *engage* with her studies, and that she take steps to ensure her university experience is as successful and as pleasant as possible. We now turn to this.

Comment [I19]: Another **Level 2 Heading**.

Rania’s Need to Engage with University Study

An active engagement with the academic culture of Avondale College is the most important thing Rania can do. One of the first items on her “engagement list” is to identify her weaknesses and begin to resolve them. Rania has singled out essay writing as a major weakness, so we can reasonably assume she is experiencing difficulties with her *reading* because reading inevitably precedes writing. Among Rania’s reading deficits is likely to be a reduced capacity to read critically because this may not have been emphasised in a school system focused on preparing students for externally moderated tests and which, as we noted above, “replace[d] intellectually challenging instruction and critical thinking with rote learning” (Mills, 2008, p. 213). First-year university student Lang Frolic lamented his own frustration at having come through a similarly limiting high-school experience by commenting, that “[s]tandardised tests...have scarred me for life;

Comment [I20]: Another **Level 1 Heading**. It indicates the start of the next major section of the essay.

still reading to regurgitate, instead of actively engaging with stuff” (personal communication, March 6, 2013). Rania need not feel that she is also scarred for life (as Lang is clearly exaggerating on this point) and can begin to “engage with stuff” by informing herself on how to develop and practise critical thinking. An excellent place to begin this campaign is to read Chapter 7, “Critical analytical thinking”, in *The Study Skills Handbook* by Stella Cottrell (2013).

Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie and Gonyea (2008) have linked engagement specifically to the experience of beginning students such as Rania, saying that engaging actively with study has a positive effect on first-year student grades and on the likelihood that the students will continue into the second year of college. Furthermore, and this relates directly to Rania’s situation, Kuh et al. pointed out, citing Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert and Pascarella (2006), that active engagement with study has a compensatory effect for first-year students who present risk factors such as “being *academically underprepared* [emphasis added]” (p. 555) for university study. This suggests that Rania, by becoming actively involved in her studies, can begin to recover from earlier negative impacts on her educational experience. More significantly, this involvement is her best guarantee for continuing academic success.

Three Dimensions of Engagement

Rania’s engagement with her study will have maximum effect if she commits to all three dimensions of engagement: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive (see Trowler, 2010, p. 5). She will attend appointments and be actively engaged in the various aspects of her study program; she will exhibit interest in and enjoyment of her study; and she will invest serious mental effort in her study program and appreciate academic challenges. A full-on engagement of this kind does not “happen by magic” (Chang, Chang, & Ledesma, 2005, as cited by Trowler, 2010, p. 12), but must be actively pursued by the student *and* the institution. Rania needs to develop a sense of investment in her study program, and she can greatly increase her chances of doing this if she sees herself as part of the Avondale community and interacts with it at various levels and in different contexts, thus creating a strong sense of involvement. Markwell (2007) endorsed such involvement, saying there is growing recognition that “learning takes place best when it is *interactive*, including interaction between students and their teachers, and amongst students themselves” (p. 12). He went on to say that the institution can facilitate this process by “put[ting] in front of students and staff ... a vision of student – *and staff* – engagement within a wider vision of an academic community” (p. 12). So, Rania, as you engage with your studies engage also with those around you, and share in the vision of your academic community.

Rania’s Need to Understand the Purpose of the University Essay

Returning specifically to Rania’s essay-writing dilemma, the first thing she should do is to settle in her own thinking – and here she can be guided by her lecturers – how the university

Comment [I21]: This is similar to the in-text citation of Comment 13. In this case only the Kuh et al. title will appear in the list of references at the end of the essay.

Comment [I22]: Another Level 2 Heading.

Comment [I23]: This is similar to the in-text citation linked to Comment 13. In this instance only the Trowler reference will appear in the list of references at the end of the essay.

Comment [I24]: This is another direct quote, and thus the page number appears in brackets at the end of the quote.

Comment [I25]: The word *put* in the original has been changed to *put[ting]* in order to maintain grammatical correctness in its new context. To indicate this change, the added letters are contained within square brackets [ting].

essay differs from the high-school essay. She will discover that the two essay types are similar in format (introduction–body–conclusion), but that they differ substantially in scope and intensity. Where high-school essays tend to follow set guidelines, such as the 5-paragraphs/3-references model, the university essay has greater freedom, or scope, to include as many paragraphs and references as are necessary to develop and defend the thesis of the essay. Intensity is related to scope and refers to the degree of cognitive effort required when researching, reflecting on, and writing the essay. There is a clear expectation by universities that this effort will be at the highest levels. This expectation is directly linked to the purpose of the university, which as we saw above is to encourage students to become independent, critical thinkers with well-reasoned opinions of their own. This is echoed by London University’s Kevin Sharpe (2009) who argued that the role of higher education is to “develop ... [students’] critical faculties and sharpen their expository and argumentative skills” (para. 6). As Rania engages with the culture of university life she will develop these important skills and will realise that the best way for her to demonstrate her growing confidence as an independent, critical thinker, is through the university essay.

Conclusion

The writing of the university essay often proves challenging for first-year students and it is understandable if some of these students claim that their high-school experience failed to prepare them for the challenge. However, the claim can be questioned on a number of grounds, especially when the complex nature of teaching and learning is considered. At most, the high school is only partly responsible for any essay-writing difficulties among first-year university students because of the many non-school factors that contribute to the problem, not the least significant of which is the role played by the students themselves. Addressing an imaginary first-year student, Rania, the paper argued that she can begin to turn around her essay-writing difficulties if she actively engages with the academic life of the university – an engagement proactively supported and encouraged by the university itself in order to foster a vision of community – and if she realises that the university essay is inspired by the very purpose of the university to encourage her to become an independent, critical thinker with well-reasoned opinions of her own.

Comment [I26]: This word had been added to the original quote for purposes of clarity. It is preceded by an ellipsis (...) to indicate that some words which were in the original quote have been left out.

Comment [I27]: Find evidence that a renewed respect for essay-writing and its purpose, can be a factor in helping students apply themselves more assiduously to the essay-writing task.

Comment [I28]: The conclusion, in a sense, is an echo of your introduction and summarises the most significant aspects of your argument. Do not introduce any new details. However, if appropriate, you might briefly suggest the wider implications of the issues raised in your paper, or predict trends (Greetham, 2001, pp. 198-199). This is more relevant for research-style essays.

Comment [I29]: This is the thesis of the paper. It appears in an expanded format here because, unlike the thesis of the introduction, it includes more detail drawn from the essay.

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