**A short rant about essays and authenticity**

(Phil Race)

When I was at school (a long time ago) they were called ‘compositions’. That was good, as one was meant to compose them. Essay means ‘try’, and it’s surely much better to succeed in composing rather than just try. Beethoven’s 5th is a composition, it’s possible to compose really good stuff.

Nowadays, one can buy an essay on almost anything. One can download a chunk, Google-translate it into German, then Spanish, then back to English in seconds, modify it a bit, and it’ll get straight through Turnitin. With large classes, there’s not the opportunity to *talk* to everyone about their essay, to ascertain that they composed it. **Whodunit** has become a real problem – if we continue to use essays, long reports, and so on. It’s much easier to guarantee the authenticity of a short, word-constrained piece than an essay – at least we’re more likely to notice copying.

Loads of research shows that we’re not at all good at **marking** essays. Credit ratings can vary from a 1st to a 3rd in degree classifications from different markers. And with English students paying £9k per year for our marking, unsurprisingly this lack of fairness is very unwelcome.

However, essays can be really good for giving students feedback upon. We can respond to their individual views. It doesn’t really matter if they didn’t own the views or had plagiarised them, we can still respond to the views and they can learn from the dialogue.

Another problem with written work is that vexed issue of word limits. Anyone can waffle on for a long time and write a big essay, but it’s much harder to write a good short one. But all this stuff about ‘academic credit’ being equivalent to 4000 words and so on – what a load of guff. Many disciplines just don’t work that way at all. And of course these days we don’t actually *write* these things at all (except in exams), we keyboard them, and cut and paste and re-mix and edit as we go. This shows how out of date written essays in exams are. Who these days wields a pen for hours on end?

So, to bring this little composition of mine pre tonight’s #LTHEchat to a close, essays can be good for feedback, but not for marks or grades. If I were Sec of State for Education, I would ban giving marks to essays. But I’m not likely to be.

Mark out of 10…………………….. Name of examiner……………………. 22nd June 2016

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