

# CONTEXTUALISING THE PATCHWORK TEXT: ADDRESSING PROBLEMS OF COURSEWORK ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## **Summary**

*The procedures of the Patchwork Text coursework assignment format are outlined, and a general justification of their current educational importance is presented. The argument begins with a review of current literature on assessment processes in higher education, followed by a discussion of work on the nature of 'academic literacies'. The Patchwork Text is compared with other assignment formats, including the portfolio and, especially, the essay. The advantages of the Patchwork text over the essay are argued in the light of general theories of the nature of learning.*

## **Introduction**

The Patchwork Text, as an innovatory coursework assignment format, is intended as a practical response to current anxieties about assessment problems in higher education. The essence of a patchwork is that it consists of a variety of small sections, each of which is complete in itself, and that the overall unity of these component sections, although planned in advance, is finalised retrospectively, when they are 'stitched together'. Thus, a 'patchwork text' assignment is one that is gradually assembled during the course of a phase of teaching and consists of a sequence of fairly short pieces of writing, which are designed to be as varied as possible and to cover the educational objectives of the teaching. Each of these short pieces of writing is shared within a small group of students as part of the teaching-learning process. At the end of the course, students add a reflexive commentary to the short pieces they have already written, which they may also, if they wish, revise and edit.

This introductory paper outlines the educational importance of these apparently straightforward procedures, placing them in the context of educational theory and current practice. While not suggesting that the Patchwork Text is a panacea for all our ills, and recognising that by ameliorating some problems we are exacerbating others, the argument is, nevertheless, that the principles of the Patchwork Text make a significant theoretical and

practical contribution to our understanding of assessment practices in Higher Education. Subsequent articles in this volume present reports describing and evaluating the introduction of the patchwork text in a variety of different academic and professional disciplines, documenting both its strengths and the problems encountered.

### **Higher Education Assessment as a Problem Area**

Assessment of students' learning is clearly at the very centre of universities' 'core business'. It is the function that universities carry out on behalf of society; it is, as it were, the product we sell. Students attend our courses and they leave us with an officially documented judgement on their work, which constitutes both an individualised evaluation and also a public qualification. University assessments inform students' subsequent choices of what they might aspire to do, and inform the decisions of other people (e.g. potential future employers) as to what students should be licensed to do. Assessment converts learning into credentials; it is the point of exchange in the teaching-learning relationship, the interface between the expert and the novice.

And yet, in spite of the central importance of assessment in the work of universities, and the hundreds of years over which universities have been carrying out assessments, the current literature displays remarkable levels of disquiet. Paul Ramsden, in his frequently reprinted book *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* opens his chapter on assessment by saying, 'The assessment of students is a serious and often tragic enterprise' (Ramsden, 1992, p. 181). And David Boud, one of the most widely influential writers on the subject, is even more emphatic:

There is probably more bad practice and ignorance of significant issues in the area of assessment than in any other aspect of higher education. This would not be so bad if it were not for the fact that the effects of bad practice are far more potent than they are for any aspect of teaching. Students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot (by definition, if they want to graduate) escape the effects of poor assessment.

(Boud, 1995, 35)

Sally Brown begins her book *Assessment Matters in Higher Education* by describing the experience of assessment as 'a nightmare' for many higher education students, and continues:

‘The conventional ways by which we choose how to assess our students are just not good enough to achieve what we want.’ (Brown, 1999, 4)

What, then, is the nature of the tragedy, the cause of the nightmare, the scope of the ‘bad practice’? I will begin to try to throw some light on these questions by examining two of the key terms frequently used to frame current presentations of higher education assessment issues.

### **‘Constructive Alignment’; ‘Deep and Surface Learning’**

Rust (2002) begins his recent review of research on higher education assessment by referring to Biggs' ‘constructive alignment’ model. Biggs elaborates this as follows:

The curriculum is stated in the form of clear objectives... Teaching methods are chosen that are likely to realise those objectives... Finally, the assessment tasks address the objectives.

(Biggs, 1999, 26)

Rust presents the idea in terms of three ‘stages’:

1. Identify clear learning outcomes
2. Design appropriate assessment tasks that will directly assess whether each of the learning outcomes has been met.
3. Design appropriate learning opportunities for the students to get them to a point where they can successfully undertake the assessment tasks.

(Rust, 2002, 148)

What seems surprising about all this is why it should need to be stated at all. Certainly one should not under-estimate the importance and difficulty of the long-standing debate about the nature of educational objectives and outcomes, concerning what sort of detail can helpfully be specified in advance. But something profoundly serious seems to be wrong if a text whose ‘major theme is that teaching is enhanced by aligning objectives, teaching methods and assessment tasks’ (Biggs, 1999, p. xii) immediately becomes, according to the publisher a ‘best-seller’; and if an up-to-the minute review of research needs to argue that learning outcomes, assessment tasks and learning opportunities need to be mutually ‘appropriate’. If we need to be told this, one might say, no wonder the writers in the previous section see

current higher education assessment practices in terms of nightmares and tragedy. How can we understand this? As a first step in addressing the question, let us examine the concepts of deep and surface learning, which are so universally used in current discussions of higher education processes.

‘Deep and Surface Learning’ is the title of the second section of Rust’s (2002) review. The concepts were first formulated more than twenty-five years ago (Marton and Saljo, 1976), but they are still both the starting point and the pervasive theme of the popular book by Prosser and Trigwell (1999, see p. 3, pp. 90-2, 169-70). In a sense, Biggs (1999) makes ‘deep and surface learning’ even more central in his argument, using it as a key term in presenting his model of a properly ‘aligned’ teaching process, previously mentioned. When we look at the detail of these arguments we can see quite clearly why the concepts of ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ learning are still so widely used and also why they are symptomatic of such profound anxiety concerning the state of higher education teaching and assessment. Here is the account given by Prosser and Trigwell:

The motivation associated with a deep approach to learning is to understand ideas and seek meanings. In adopting this approach students have an intrinsic interest in the task and an expectation of enjoyment in carrying it out. They adopt strategies that help satisfy their curiosity such as making the task coherent with their own experience; relating and distinguishing evidence and argument; looking for patterns and underlying principles;... seeing the parts of the task as making up the whole; theorising about it...

In adopting a surface approach to learning, students see tasks as external impositions... They are instrumentally or pragmatically motivated and seek to meet the demands of the task with minimum effort. They adopt strategies which include: a focus on unrelated parts of the task; separate treatment of related parts; a focus on what are seen as essentials;... the reproduction of the essentials as accurately as possible; and rote memorizing information for assessment purposes rather than for understanding. Overall they would appear to be involved in study without reflection on purpose...

(Prosser and Trigwell, 1999, 91)

In other words, the terms ‘deep and surface learning’ articulate a sense that the whole educational enterprise is frequently ineffective at the most basic level. All too frequently our teaching fails to elicit more than an attempt by students to exploit the ambiguities in our assessment processes, to ‘play the system’. Instead of what anyone would mean by education, we are faced by a combination of ritualism, deception and collusion. Biggs’ account shows even more explicitly that ‘deep learning’ simply represents our basic professional aspirations

as educators, and ‘surface learning’ merely formulates our sense of frequent failure, frustration and disappointment:

The deep approach arises from a felt need to engage the task appropriately and meaningfully, so the student tries to use the most appropriate cognitive strategies for handling it... They try to focus on underlying meaning...students have positive feelings: interest, a sense of importance, challenge, even of exhilaration. Learning is a pleasure. The surface approach arises from an intention to get the task out of the way with minimum trouble, while appearing to meet requirements. Low cognitive level activities are used, when higher-level activities are required.... As applied to academic learning, examples include rote-learning selected content instead of understanding it, padding an essay, listing points instead of addressing an argument, quoting secondary references as if they were primary ones; the list is endless.

(Biggs, 1999, 16; 14)

To sum up this section, then, the continued emphasis on the obvious injunction that educational objectives, teaching methods and assessment processes need to be ‘aligned’ and on the threat that the educational process at its most basic level may be subverted by what is euphemistically called ‘surface learning’ indicates an awareness of a continuing problem at the heart of the work of universities. This is not a new awareness: Howard Becker and his colleagues documented and analysed with beautiful precision forty years ago how students typically ‘played the system’ of higher education, in their books *Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School* (1961) and *Making the Grade: The Academic Side of College Life* (1968). But these were sociologists’ external, ironic critiques of our profession, whereas now it has become an essential aspect of our professional self-understanding and a starting point for a concerted search for remedies.

It is as a contribution to this search that the Patchwork Text is proposed (without suggesting, of course, that it is a complete solution). But first we need to review other recent proposals for remedying the inadequacy of higher education assessment, both in terms of general principles and the specific innovatory assessment formats that are intended to embody them. It is important to note, therefore, that the following two sections are not intended as a fully comprehensive list of recent proposals concerning higher education assessment; rather, it selects out those suggestions which provide a relevant context for arguments concerning the Patchwork Text assignment format.

## Improving Assessment in Higher Education: Some Principles

We can take as our starting point the ten-point ‘manifesto’ summarising the dimensions of good assessment practice with which Brown et. al. (1996) end their book *500 Tips on Assessment*, and which Young (1999) endorses as a set of evaluative criteria. Some of these ten points are, although not easy to realise, nevertheless fairly self-evident: assessment should be valid, reliable and consistent; its purposes should be clearly explained, the amount should be appropriate and criteria should be understandable, explicit and public. The others, while equally ‘obvious’ in some ways, are more specifically relevant to the general argument in favour of the Patchwork Text:

- Assessment should be based on an understanding of how students learn
- Assessment should accommodate individual differences in students
- Assessment forms should allow students to receive feedback on their learning
- Assessment should provide staff and students with opportunities to reflect on their practice and their learning
- Assessment should be an integral component of course design, and not something bolted on afterwards

(Brown et. al., 1996, 142-3; Young, 1999, 125)

Using research data ‘from a wide range of people on how they learn best’, Race (1995) presents four ‘key factors’. He also emphasises the importance of students receiving feedback on assessment tasks, and also adds three further points:

- the importance of ‘the want to learn’, or motivation
- the fact that most learning is ‘by doing’...
- the need to make sense of what has been learned, or to ‘digest it’.

(Race, 1995, p. 61)

The themes of Race’s four factors are more or less echoed in Gibbs (1999) rather more specific ‘principles’, derived from an empirical case study. First, he argues, an assessment process needs to encourage ‘appropriate learning activity’ by maximising the amount of time that students spend ‘on task’. Thus a process which ensures that student effort is distributed evenly across the course is better than, say, an essay which focuses on ‘a narrow subset of the course material ... in week seven’. This may be seen as echoing Race’s emphasis on the need for students to have time to ‘digest’ the learning acquired during a course of study. The point is made again in Rust’s discussion of ‘pacing learning’ (Rust, 2002, 153-4), and it clarifies Brown et. al.’s arguments about the need for assessment tasks to be an integral part of the teaching learning process and to encourage reflection on the learning

process (see above), which are indeed key aspects of the Patchwork Text process. Gibbs' other main emphasis is, again, on the need for feedback, but he goes further, stressing the need that feedback should be given 'reasonably soon after the learning activity', and that it should have 'a social dimension'. In other words, it should be public rather than private and should involve students sharing their work in a process of peer assessment because this, he argues, will facilitate students' 'internalization of criteria for quality' (Gibbs, 1999, pp.43-7). Students' sharing of their work is an important feature of the Patchwork Text, although the process of establishing consensus about criteria is, of course, both complex and difficult.

Brown et. al's suggestion that we need to 'understand how students learn' will be of central importance at a later stage in the argument, but meanwhile it is worth noting how their emphasis on the importance of students' individual differences, which is a further crucial dimension of the rationale for the Patchwork Text, has been amplified by other writers. For Biggs, an awareness of the variety of students' 'ability, motivation and prior knowledge' is an axiomatic starting point, one of the key components of his model of the teaching process (Biggs, 1999, 18). Rust reminds us that this argument is particularly important at a time when universities are concerned both to 'widen participation' in higher education, to include 'non-traditional groups of students' who are particularly likely to lack intellectual self-confidence, and to ensure that greater initial inclusivity does not simply lead to higher rates of drop-out and failure (Rust, 2002, 151). Prosser and Trigwell discuss at some length students' differences in prior subject knowledge and their different approaches to learning and study (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999, 26-43). They conclude their book with a deeply felt statement on the need for teaching to take into account students' prior experience and knowledge, the need to 'bring to the foreground of their awareness' the understandings needed for their current learning which students already possess (op. cit., 175). In many ways this links with what David Boud calls the central educational concept of student autonomy (Boud, 1988, 31): only if the teaching and assessment process enables students to draw on their own experience and previous knowledge can they 'take some significant responsibility for their own learning over and above responding to instruction' (op. cit., 23). Developing autonomy is also clearly related to Gibbs' comments on the importance of encouraging students to 'internalise' quality criteria through peer assessment (see above).

So much for statements of general principle. Let us now turn to look at the assessment methods and formats in which principles must be embodied if they are to be realised in practice.

## **Assessment Formats: Variety, 'Reflection'**

In her recent discussion of the reviews of university assessment procedures conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, Angela Glasner presents a list of the coursework assessment formats currently in use. Excluding multiple-choice tests (which lie outside the current argument for reasons that will become increasingly apparent) and formats exclusively concerning practical work (e.g. 'lab reports'), the list is more or less as follows: essays, dissertations, reports, book reviews, oral / audio-visual and poster presentations, note-books and portfolios (Glasner, 1999, 21-2). Similar lists are presented by Brown et. al. (1997, 46-7) and in the popular and much reprinted *53 Interesting Ways to Assess your Students* (Habeshaw, et. al., 1993). It is significant that all these lists begin with the essay. As Glasner observes, 'Although there is an increasing range of methods being used, ... the familiar exam and coursework essay still predominate' (Glasner, 1999, 25). This is the context in which Brown laments:

Generally in institutions of higher education we assess a very limited range of students' skills, knowledge and ability.... We give them the same old types of activity to do again and again, testing knowledge to (sic) the cost of ability, product to the cost of process.

Brown, 1999, 7

The question posed by this list, then, is whether (and how) it might become the basis for going beyond the 'familiar coursework essay' and thereby vary and expand the range of student ability and knowledge that we assess. Ramsden, for, example, asserts quite explicitly that no single method of assessment will be sufficient: a variety of assessment tasks is always desirable, 'as a means of providing students with opportunities for demonstrating how much they understand' (Ramsden, 1992, 190-2) – an argument which follows on from the previous discussion of the wide range of students' prior knowledge and experience. Is the suggestion, then, that an ideal assessment process should include at least several of the formats listed? Might students be expected to keep a note-book of their learning, compile a portfolio of evidence, write a book review, submit a mini-project report, give a poster presentation *and* write a final essay? Clearly, this would be impractical in terms of the workload for students and for the staff assessing them! One might, however, quite realistically suggest that individual course modules should always be assessed through a minimum of two of the listed formats and that overall programmes should try to ensure a fairly full coverage of all of them, which is indeed the currently espoused policy of many universities.



But the danger of this solution is that it leaves the conventional essay unchallenged as the 'normal' format, with the others as occasional supplements. Let us examine briefly why this is likely to be the case and then, in more detail in the following section, why the predominance of the essay is a problem. The advantage of the essay is that it is compact, easily circulated to moderators and external examiners and appears to test some of the most important intellectual skills: the selection of relevant facts, the evaluation of viewpoints, the structuring of arguments and thus, in general, the demonstration of *understanding*. As George Brown and his colleagues observe, 'A good case could be made for arguing that... essays are the most useful way of assessing deep learning. For they *can* require a student to integrate knowledge, skills and understanding' (Brown et. al., 1997, 59). But the writers' emphasis here ('*can*') is significant and ominous, a tacit admission that students' essays all too frequently fail to achieve this potential ideal.

Meanwhile, leaving aside, for the moment, the problems of the essay, what are the assessment difficulties with the other formats? An oral presentation suffers from the problem that, even if it has been recorded, re-assessment by moderators or external examiners is very time-consuming and sometimes impracticable. Posters do not necessarily require students to construct their own *discursive* analysis of material: a visual structure, some might argue, requires less intellectual grasp than a coherent and extended discussion. Note-books, learning diaries and journals present a further set of problems. Clearly, they are a valuable aid to *learning*, but making notes for oneself, almost by definition, does not require the explicitness that would enable others to evaluate its clarity, and including them in an assessment process may well inhibit the writing and thus reduce its value for the student. At best, then: 'Open journals require high-trust, low-risk situations, perhaps built on long-term relationships, if they are to be used in summative assessment' (Brown et. al., 1997, 187). Brockbank and McGill go further, making a sharp distinction between a learning journal (a private document that is not assessed) and a public, assessed 'portfolio', which contains material selected from the journal and a commentary on its contents (Brockbank and McGill, 1998, 103-4).

For portfolios as an assessment format, the issue of selectivity noted by Brockbank and McGill is crucial, otherwise they can easily become very bulky and thus, like oral presentations, impractical for moderation and external examining. To avoid this, the required structure for the portfolio needs to be carefully planned in advance (Brown et. al., 1997, 187) and an analytical commentary on the portfolio contents also becomes important (Brown and Knight, 1994, 83; Winter and Maisch, 1996, 89). This in turn means that the portfolio assessment format places a premium on student 'self-awareness' (Brown and Knight, 1994, 82). It can thus become, according to Brockbank and McGill, in contrast to an essay, an

opportunity for students to demonstrate the *reflective process* of learning, the 'relationship' they establish with the material through a developmental 'dialogue' over time and with others (Brockbank and McGill, 101).

Here, at last, we reach the core of the argument. What is it about the essay format that means that it frequently fails to encourage the process of 'reflective' learning? (Even though it looks as though in principle it ought to - see above.) This is the theme of the next section, leading on to the subsequent discussion of what the 'patchwork text' adds to the 'portfolio' in formulating a remedy.

### **The Problem with Academic Essays**

Let us begin with a restatement of the ideal - the conventional, optimistic claim:

The essay is obviously the medium for reflective writing... Reflective writing transforms the writer's thinking... Writing tasks should require students to 'make use of existing knowledge and beliefs [and] lead to questioning and reflecting on that knowledge [and to] theorise about their experiences'... By reflecting on what you see, you can revise it in so many ways, creating something quite new, even to yourself. That is what the best academic writing should be doing.

(Biggs, 173)

In contrast, Brown and Knight (1994) evoke a very different reality:

Essays tend to be ballasted with information and copious references to stock sources... In most essays, the urge to convince the assessor that the learner knows something about the main areas of information is disastrous. The introduction tells us what blocks of knowledge are to be covered but not how they will lead to a certain conclusion, let alone revealing that there are substantial conceptual ambiguities in the title anyway. The blocks follow one another like coal wagons on a train, although the links between the blocks are less obvious, amounting only to the fact that one follows the other in some arbitrary way, until the tail-light of the conclusion is reached.

(Brown and Knight, 1994, 65)

Five years later, Dignam is equally pessimistic, describing most student essays as non-functional ritualistic imitations of distantly perceived and uncomprehended models:

By their final year [my students] should have read some of the best work in their field of study. Yet very few seem to be able to... replicate the methodology involved in producing a persuasive argument. They hardly seem to see any connection between the work they have to produce in their essays and the books and articles they read. The end result is an essay that seems to have a structure... that might float an argument. But the argument invariably sinks without trace.

(Dignam, 1999)

So how can we explain this familiar and oft-lamented failure of students to 'write a good essay'? The writers already cited analyse in detail what students *should* do (see, for example, Ramsden, 1992, 56; Biggs, 1999, 37-40), and offer practical advice to staff on how to provide better guidance and structure (Habeshaw et. al., 1993, chapter 1; Brown and Knight, 1994, 66; Brown, G. et. al., 1997, chapter 5). But for a more broadly-based explanation of the difficulties experienced in their attempts at academic writing we need to turn to a different body of work, concerned with what has come to be called 'academic literacies'.

Within the 'academic literacies' approach, the regular failure of students to engage in 'deep learning' is understood in terms of the *epistemological* complexity of academic essay writing. The expectations concerning the writing of essays in different subjects and contexts are seen as embodying a series of specific relationships between culture, personal identity and the institutionalization of disciplinary knowledge in the form of academic practices and conventions (Jones et. al., 1999; Lea and Street, 2000). Consequently, most students will not only have a sense of the discrepancy between their knowledge derived from general experience and the knowledge that will count as relevant in an academic context (McMillan, 2000) but are likely to experience this discrepancy as (initially at least) unexpected, arbitrary, demeaning and threatening:

Classrooms in academic institutions and academic writing are sites where identities get constructed and where knowledge is contested, and... learning encounters are infused with and construct [the] power relations of these sites... When students have their experience and their questions not taken up, when institutional knowledge is being privileged over students' knowledge, students may have a sense of being 'deprofessionalised.... What is at stake for students is their self... [They] want to bring into the debate what they know.

(Hermerschmidt, M (1999, 14-15)

But for students to bring what they know into a debate where new 'academic' *identities* are being constructed is not easy. For, as Pardoe (2000) argues, to do so involves

knowing, for example, to which features of an experience or a piece of knowledge a *general* significance may be 'attributed' within the conceptual framework of a discipline, as opposed to those that are (within that framework) 'merely particulars'. To make a generalisation may seem straightforward to the student, but to do so successfully requires a grasp of an underlying disciplinary structure. No wonder, then, that for students other than those entering university immediately after a traditionally academic secondary school curriculum the rules and conventions implicitly embodied in 'academic writing' represent a major obstacle. For such students (a substantial proportion now that serious efforts are being made to widen participation in higher education) Lillis (1999) describes the conventions of 'essayist literacy' as 'the institutional practice of mystery'. She elaborates:

What is important about the practice of essayist literacy, with its particular configuration of conventions, is that although it represents one way, rather than the only way of making meaning, it is the privileged practice within formal institutions... Numerous studies point to the ways in which the privileging of one literacy ensures continuity between home and formal institutions of learning for some learners, notably those from white middle class backgrounds, whilst significantly contributing to discontinuity for others - learners from working class and minority ethnic backgrounds.

(Lillis, 1999, 131)

Consequently, Lillis criticises the naivety of Biggs' assumption that essay questions and guidelines can simply be 'made clear' (Lillis, 1999, 132) and goes on to give a quotation from one of her students that reminds us how frequently, in spite of carefully worded guidance, students' essay writing is often an act of hopeful but uncomprehending compliance with a set of external and, to them indeed 'mysterious' rules:

It was one of those essays I wrote and I didn't really know whether I was writing *what she wanted*. So I just sort of did it to the best of my ability. And *it turned out she liked it*.

(Lillis, 1999, 132)

Whereas Lillis describes the specific problem of 'academic literacies' for 'non-traditional' students, Lea (1999) is concerned with the general issue of how students achieve some sort of meaningful relationship between their everyday experience and the 'literacy' rules and practices implicitly required by their course of study. In responding to an essay question, students face, she says, a dilemma. On the one hand they may adopt the strategy of merely 'reformulating' academic texts in their own words and ignoring the relationship between the texts and their own prior and 'outside' experience, thereby producing a form of writing which tutors are likely to award a favourable academic assessment. Or, on the other

hand, they may insist on attempting to relate course texts 'reflexively' to their own personal and cultural context, in which case they will find that they need to pose some sort of 'challenge' to the academic texts they read, with the result that tutors are likely to assess their writing as 'incoherent and unstructured' (Lea, 1999, 112-115).

The concept of 'academic literacies' is helpful in explaining the otherwise surprising intractability of the problem of assessment in higher education, and the centrality of the phenomenon of the academic essay. However, it could be argued that a limitation of the concept is that it seems to limit the options for change, by treating current academic boundaries and practices rather too much as fixed and inevitable, albeit problematic and the source of much student pain. So let us now turn to lines of argument that focus on the university as a context of change, so that we can then, once more, consider the viability of assessment formats other than the conventional essay.

### **Challenging the Essay: The Portfolio and the Patchwork Text**

Unlike the 'academic literacies' model, which takes the structure of existing academic disciplinary practices as a cultural 'given', the work of Messer-Davidow and her colleagues (1993) emphasises the social and historical processes at work as academic disciplines split, combine and otherwise develop over time. Similarly, Ronald Barnett's well-known series of books present a critical analysis of higher education institutions as sites of conflict, where structures of knowledge and academic practices slowly and reluctantly respond to new technologies, new social, cultural and political norms, and - above all - new arguments that question the epistemological *authority* of universities' work.

Knowledge does not have a clearly marked boundary... Rather, it is a bloody battlefield being fought on many fronts, with the boundary line often lost in the quagmire... The search for ultimate foundations of knowledge has been abandoned ... There is no end point in the search for knowledge and sound practice... only conversation... And conversation means taking seriously the critical viewpoints of others.

Knowledge and truth, then, no longer offer a firm framework for the university... The world is radically unknowable... Very well, let us define the nature of the modern university around this realization... What cluster of concepts, in that case, opens up? The constellation of concepts I want to invoke consists, in its inner circle of four concepts:

- uncertainty

- unpredictability
- challengeability
- contestability

(Barnett, 1992, 26-7; 2000, 47; 63)

Barnett's work provides a broadly-based argument in favour of a model of teaching and learning focused on dialogue, critical reflection, reflexivity, self awareness and self-evaluation (Barnett, 1992, 26). Thus Barnett even extends the term 'reflective practitioner' to include the process of *students'* learning in higher education:

Only in that moment of self-reflection can any real state of intellectual freedom be attained... Only through becoming a continuing 'reflective practitioner' can the student... gain a measure of personal integrity.

(Barnett, 1990, 160)

What we might conclude from all this is that what Lea, 1999, describes as 'reformulating texts' is no more an adequate model of the educational process than 'surface learning'. And the continuing importance of Barnett's work in emphasising 'critical being' and learning through conversation to define the proper aims and scope of higher education has recently been strongly re-stated (see Curzon-Hobson, 2002).

All this takes us back to the criticisms of the essay format, presented in the previous section, and, in particular, it also takes us back to Brockbank and McGill's arguments in favour of the 'portfolio' as an assessment format. Their argument is that the essay, written at a single point in time, cannot record 'The process of dialogue whereby a student may grapple with an issue, share it with others, and come to some joint understanding of a concept or difficulty' (Brockbank and McGill, 1998, 101). For this, they argue, a portfolio is needed, in which a student can record the reflective developmental *process* of their learning (ibid.). But Brockbank and McGill also emphasise that a complete and sound assessment process will require *both* an essay *and* a portfolio (ibid.) The reason for their insistence on the need for both formats is perhaps explained by the etymology of the term 'portfolio', as a container for 'carrying' a collection of 'sheets' of paper. In other words, a portfolio brings together a collection of otherwise separate items, but it does not necessarily require that the unity and structure underlying these items be examined and clarified; 'unity and structure', one might conclude, are the province of the essay. Similarly, although Habeshaw et. al. (1993) describe a portfolio format which is carefully restricted as to length, their emphasis is that a portfolio offers students a large degree of choice as to what they write about, and that in the end they

make their own selection from their writing, as long as it demonstrates 'some kind of coherence' (Habeshaw et. al., 1993, 87-88). Again, one can suppose that many academic colleagues would see such work as probably lacking a clear demonstration that the student has grasped the overall structure of a course of study, as required by the unified argumentation of the essay format.

Some, indeed, may see the Patchwork Text as merely a modification of the portfolio, and the term itself is not important. What *is* important, however, is that a patchwork is not just a 'collection' but a 'pattern': in the end it does have a unity, albeit made up of separate components. The unity of the Patchwork Text has two dimensions. To begin with it is defined by academic staff, as they carefully derive a sequence of tasks from the course material. And finally it is, as it were, re- defined by individual students, who review (and perhaps edit) their separate pieces of work in order to write their final section as an interpretation of what this course material 'means', to them, now (see Scoggins and Winter, 1999). In this way, one might argue, the Patchwork Text seeks to integrate the different (and apparently opposed) assessment advantages of the essay (unified structure) and the portfolio (individual reflection).

### **The Patchwork Text and the Nature of the Learning Process**

This final section draws together the ideas presented so far, by comparing the main features of the Patchwork Text (see Introduction, above) with the various statements of current assessment 'principles', the critical arguments of Ronald Barnett and the writers on 'academic literacies', and with some general ideas about the nature of learning.

First, as we have noted, there is a recognition that assessment should be based on an understanding of how students learn. In itself an obvious point, of course, but it was linked with the idea that learning is a *process* which takes place *gradually*, so students need *time* to 'digest' their learning, to *make sense* of it. This 'gradual' model of learning as 'making sense over time' lies at the heart of the Patchwork Text. It echoes the central tenet of Piaget's general theory of learning as a dual process moving both outwards and inwards. On the one hand, learning involves 'accommodating' one's existing interpretative schemas to take account of new ideas and experiences (i.e. transforming one's self) and, on the other hand, 'assimilating' new experiences and ideas so that they 'fit in' with one's existing concepts (i.e. transforming the world). This, says Piaget, is the general process of all intelligent action, from the infant initially constructing an intelligible universe to the academic making a new

scientific discovery (Piaget, 1937, Conclusion; 1950, 7). In a different, but related, way, the 'hermeneutic' tradition in philosophy also sees learning as a complex dual process, which by its very nature requires time for its gradual development. For understanding to take place, details must be understood by relating them to the totality of which they are a part and, conversely, overall structures can only be understood in terms of the details which constitute them (Gadamer, 1975, 258). Even more explicitly, Claxton argues in favour of a 'leisurely' mode of learning, 'slow ways of knowing', adopting a view of the mind that recognises its deeper, as yet inarticulate, not fully conscious resources for making sense (Claxton, 1988, 6; 12-13). The sequence of tasks within a Patchwork Text, then, is intended to build into the assessment process a recognition of learning as a gradual 'coming to know'.

Second, a number of writers have referred to individual differences between students and cultural differences between groups of students, which need to be fully taken into account if we aspire to encourage proper 'autonomy' in student responses to our assessment tasks; i.e. if we wish to encourage in students a sense of responsibility and commitment, rather than the mere alienated compliance characterised as 'surface learning'. Although there may be a special problem here concerning the increasing number of what we continue to call 'non-traditional' students, the problem is general. We need to ensure that the assessment tasks create a process that requires and enables all students to negotiate the mutually challenging relationship between their own prior knowledge and their course of study. Otherwise we will find that we are accidentally encouraging them to ignore 'who they are' and to take refuge in 'reformulating texts' in accordance with what they take to be the rules of a particular 'academic literacy'. This is why it is so important that the tasks that make up a Patchwork Text encourage students to write in a variety of different ways. Some tasks will certainly require analytical writing (e.g. a book review, a summary of a lecture with a commentary) but others may be, for example, experiential (e.g. an account of a relevant experience).

Variety of 'genre' (including, indeed, visual modes of representation) is thus essential if we are to give students the opportunity to explore their own ways of expressing their understanding, and to find that the strengths they bring with them are a resource, rather than, as is so often the case, an obstacle. In other words, the assessment task must emphasise learning as an *individualised* accomplishment, and in this context it is helpful to note Levi-Strauss's (1966) distinction between 'engineering' and 'bricolage'. Engineers, says Levi-Strauss, produce their structures by operating within a fully pre-planned, closed system of concepts, procedures and components; whereas 'bricoleurs' (Do-It-Yourself enthusiasts) consult what they happen to have in the shed in order to improvise new structures from materials that were originally part of something else. They 'engage in a sort of dialogue with



[the various tools and materials they have 'to hand'] to widen the possible answers... to discover what each of them could 'signify' (Levi-Strauss, 1966, 17-18). And it is this notion of 'bricolage', rather than engineering, which, as Derrida says, best characterises most of human discourse (Derrida, 1976, Preface), and which seems to underpin Lave's general statement on the nature of learning:

Doing and knowing are inventive... They are open-ended processes of improvisation with the social, material and experiential resources at hand.

(Lave, 1993, 13)

So, unless we make explicit in our assessment tasks that we want students to construct their own learning, and that this includes *improvising* with the resources they already possess, they will think that 'engineering' is the name of the game, go for a ready-made kit 'off the shelf', and discover that, as usual, they cannot really understand or follow the technical instructions.

Third, we have noted various references to the importance of the need for 'social' feed-back, through discussion of students' work among their peers, and that this also is intrinsic to the Patchwork Text process. At one level this simply embodies Vygotsky's seminal argument that 'thinking' *arises from and takes place within* purposeful social interaction (Vygotsky, 1962). At another level it embodies Barnett's argument (derived from the philosophy of Richard Rorty) that the basic form of knowledge is not authoritative revelation of objective truths, but a developing, always incomplete 'conversation' among those who recognise the limitations of their current understanding (Rorty, 1979, 171).

Finally, if knowledge is always incomplete, uncertain and open to challenge, then, as Barnett concludes, the fundamental intellectual values that we ask students to demonstrate must include self-understanding and self-evaluation, a form of 'critical reflexivity'. And this is exactly what the final ('retrospective commentary') section of the Patchwork Text requires: a statement about how the student now, at the end of a particular phase of learning, sees her / his 'state of knowledge' with respect to the course topics and her / his sense of their coherence and significance. Moreover, the argument that the structure of our knowledge is provisional and personally constructed is a further rationale for what is perhaps the central feature of the Patchwork Text. The Patchwork Text deconstructs the essay's monolithic, finalising unity into a series of *fragments*, with a possible overall 'pattern' that is *waiting* to be synthesised by means of a personal journey of exploration. Thus, it embodies a model of learning as an act of *imagination*, i.e. as an essentially creative process of discovering links between matters that may seem initially to be separate (Warnock, 1976, 28).

To conclude then: the Patchwork Text is intended as a textual format that in itself actually reflects the incomplete and provisional nature of learning. In contrast, the form of the essay implicitly embodies a claim to have achieved mastery, and this is a fundamentally unrealistic claim for most students to attempt after just a few weeks or months of grappling with new ideas. For academics, writing an article or a lecture, it is appropriate to present our work (concerning matters at the centre of our expertise with which we have become familiar through years of specialised study) in the form of an integrated text, speaking with the single, unified voice of our accumulated authority. But the rationale for the Patchwork Text is that students are in a quite different situation. They are trying to come to terms with a variety of new and unfamiliar voices, in the midst of which they must try somehow to keep track of their own individual voice, as an engaged participant but not (yet) as 'the master'. Let us then ask them to write a text whose form is not that of a lecture but that of a drama containing different voices challenging each other, the unfolding drama of gradual discovery, the drama of learning.

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