Is the Essay Dead?
Revitalising Argument in the Era of Multiliteracies

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Abstract: While the essay is the default assessment tool of the Humanities in upper secondary and tertiary education, it is a text type that has been slowly bled of communicative purpose. It is suffered by students, taught according to restrictive formula and ignored in the literature. Evidence from the tertiary sector, employers and public examinations suggests that students are struggling to become effective writers in this form. This paper advocates the need to apply renewed critical attention to the educational potential of argumentation, rhetoric, dialogic teaching, functional linguistics and multiliteracies. It is proposed that essay-writing can be revitalised with attention to argument as a mode of discourse with the academic essay as one possible realisation of this way of thinking and communicating. In this way a school-wide orientation to argumentation, expressed in a wide variety of argumentative writing, can re-energise essay-writing as a form. Finally, elements from the Australian Curriculum are examined in this context.

Introduction
Robert Atwan (2012, para. 2–3), founder of The Best American Essays series, calls a favourite essay by James Baldwin ‘hypnotic, beautifully modulated and yet full of urgency’; for him it is ‘deeply personal’ and yet ‘deeply engaged with issues and ideas’. As an English teacher I read these words and salivate. What would it take for our students to write like this? Given, Baldwin is a professional and not confined to forty exam minutes, but do we even expect an orientation towards this kind of writing anymore? While it is arguable that this expectation still exists in creative classwork, on digital platforms, and up to Years 9 and 10 (aged 14–15), something strange then happens and argumentative writing becomes ‘an exercise in which one strings together a set of reasonable sounding arguments, being careful not to include anything that anyone might challenge’ (Kuhn & Crowell, 2011, p. 1). Perhaps, as Sanborn (1994) notes, the chasm between the literary essay, which (too seldom) is an object of study in the classroom, and the ‘school essay’ which is produced by students, is not a gap of quality, but one of intent?

The essay ‘proceeds by set formulae which are not enjoyed by students and which cramp their expressiveness’ (Andrews, 1995, p. 5). It has ossified in the 20th century into a generic test of content knowledge in the humanities, and we are consequently in danger of losing not only a competence in this once-lively form of non-fiction writing, but a series of skills that stretch from reflectiveness, through dialogue and critical literacy, to meaningful engagement with public issues.

Teachers and students are becoming increasingly interested in using digital tools to develop authentic non-fiction writing, not the least because such skills have a strong focus in contemporary Australian syllabus documents. It is therefore tempting to accept the limitations of the essay, pigeonhole it as an assessment tool and forget about it as both a learning tool and an object of serious pedagogical attention. But what are we losing with such an approach? And is it a wise move if the evidence is increasingly suggesting that students’ assessment essay-writing is not effective? It is the contention of the authors that, by accepting the current situation, we thereby accept an impoverished view of both argument and the essay; one that is at odds with
its pre-20th century history, and one that is doing students in the post-20th century knowledge society a disservice.

The essay is most usefully conceived of as one possible form for the expression of written argument. Argument is best defined as a mode of discourse in the same manner as narrative or description (Andrews, 1994). In a broadly socio-cognitive framework, argumentation can be seen as a ‘verbal and social activity of reason aimed at increasing (or decreasing) the acceptability of a controversial standpoint for the listener or reader’ (van Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 7). This is achieved by marshalling propositions and their supporting evidence in a process of justification aimed at influencing – rather than physically coercing for example – a rational audience. Contrary to the glossary of the new NSW syllabus for the Australian Curriculum (New South Wales Board of Studies, 2012, p. 131), persuasion, with its appeal to emotion, is best seen as one kind of argument, and not vice versa (Schwarz & Asterhan, 2010). Nor is ‘discussion’ apt. According to Andrews (1995), discussion is more informal, more limited to spoken exchanges and smaller in scale than argument. Discussion is included, therefore, under the term ‘argument’ as this larger classification covers interactions ranging from the tentative dialogic exploration of an issue, to more formal debates or disputes which could not rightly be called ‘discussions’.

Perhaps an awareness of the communicative purpose of argument may work as an antidote to the aridity of the essay, which for many students has become an inauthentic role play at genuine argumentation. If, as Pirie (1997) suggests, the fit between communication and essay-writing seems like a strange one, then this is a strong warning that our conception and utilisation of both mode and form have become dangerously narrow. We argue to fulfil many different purposes: to clarify, persuade, win, entertain, unload, resolve, and find identity (Andrews, 1994, p. 63). Not only are these important for the health of democracy, they suggest that there is hope yet for the essay, if it is viewed as one possible socially constrained manifestation of argument. In an ideal world students would be able to persuade someone to consider them for a job interview, as well as articulate their nuanced thoughts about the nature of humanity in *Hamlet*. The external inducement approach to essay-writing (‘you need it to do well in exams, uni, life …’) is akin to the medicinal approach to life: this is painful but you’ll thank us later. Some students are willing and able to take this on, but who can blame the ones who aren’t? A focus on argumentation and the competencies needed for doing it successfully leads to an understanding that the essay, the letter to the editor, the job application and the restrained missive to the real estate agent demanding action on the dodgy water heater, are equally valuable forms that depend on a core set of skills, number one of which is the ability to suit argumentation to the context, purpose and audience (including the imagined academic marker).

This paper will first set out the case for bringing the essay and argumentative writing back into pedagogical focus, then examine approaches that may help teachers reinvigorate both form and mode of discourse.

**Part 1: The Lie of the Land**

**How healthy is contemporary essay-writing?** While the most recent data on the persuasive writing of Australian Year 9 students shows that an impressive 82% of our students are achieving ‘at or above the National Minimum Standard’ (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), 2013, p. 23), there are two areas that warrant careful exploration. Firstly, the results are skewed away from rural and regional students, and Indigenous students – particularly those living in the Northern Territory (NT) – of whom only 53.9% achieved at or above the national minimum. The children of low income earners or those without post-Year 12 education fared especially poorly. These figures suggest that there is a significant proportion of students from disadvantaged, marginalised or non-metropolitan backgrounds who are not mastering a form of communication that is highly valued by the education and employment sectors.

Secondly, the term ‘mastering’ warrants further attention. According to ACARA (2013, Year 9, para. 2), a ‘persuasive essay’ at minimum standards involves a student writing

an introduction, a body and a conclusion in which paragraphs are used to organise related ideas. Students attempt to develop their position on a topic with some elaboration and detail about the topic and use a range of persuasive devices with some success.

This definition suggests a bare minimum when it comes to competencies in argumentative writing and the figures for students who achieved *above* (not ‘at or above’) this standard are sobering. Just over 60% in NSW in 2013 and 2012, 37% in the NT. Of Indigenous
students, for example, 26% in NSW made it into this category. In the NT the figure is 10% (NAPLAN, 2013, p. 23). In the largely essay-based 2012 New South Wales Higher School Certificate English exam (Board of Studies NSW, 2012b), only 33% of the total candidate exhibited the ‘well developed skills’ required in the top two (out of six) achievement bands. It is noted that these data are partial and open to interpretation, for example in the way that HSC English marks are the outcome of complex scaling procedures.

The wider evidence, however, is more unequivocal. The essay-writing field seems somewhat fractured, typified by blame from ‘higher’ levels of education towards those ‘lower down’ (undergraduate, upper secondary, lower secondary, primary) for failing to adequately prepare students. Several studies (see for example Moody & Bobic, 2011) describe university professors’ complaints about the poor writing ability of even the best credentialed students. Internationally, both the 2006 US National Commission on Writing (discussed in Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008, p. 1) and Graham and Perin’s (2007) review of writing research uncovered widespread concern in tertiary sectors that students were failing to produce good writing defined by ‘clarity, accuracy and logical thinking’. Meanwhile in an overview for the University of Sydney’s Writing Hub, Shetler, Thomas and Di Lauro (2013, ‘Collaboration’, para. 1) describe longitudinal research that finds ‘students unprepared for university writing after high school, and unprepared for workplace writing after university’.

The situation is hardly new, or restricted either geographically, historically, or according to educational level. Andrews (1995) described the continuing and widespread sense in UK education circles through the 1980s and 90s that students were failing to develop adequate argumentation skills. Essay writing was widely disliked, considered formulaic, and seen to cramp expression (by students and educators alike). In the US, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1998 Report Card found that 55% of students were below ‘sufficient’ in persuasive writing (Felton & Herko, 2004). Their essays were considered to be full of assertions and lacking in organised elaboration and evidential support. The 2008 NAEP report confirmed the absence of skills in counterfactual reasoning and dual or integrated perspectives that were deemed necessary at that level (Kuhn & Crowell, 2011). In their research on chat rooms in an Australian setting, Morgan and Beaumont (2003) identified the weaknesses of early adolescents’ argumentative writing: they were often limited to one point, found it difficult to substantiate beyond point-scoring and were restricted in terms of constructing texts with a specific reader and purpose in mind.

This is – of course – a snapshot that may be obscuring a complex range of variables: exam stress, content knowledge, school ethos, extent of essay-writing development. The argument advanced here is not for a renewed literacy panic. Nor is a Romantic yearning for the supposed glories of the essayist literacy of old the way forward. But it is proposed that the current state of essay writing reveals that we are losing a particular style of thinking, and composing based on that thinking, with the consequence that a majority of students find it difficult to compose essays that are judged effective. It is time to turn our attention to how our approaches to teaching essay-writing have contributed to this decline.

Current approaches and challenges
Writing is an act of communication and an act of culture. In our English classrooms our students are encouraged to respond to and compose texts that are meaningful acts of representation. According to Dixon and Stratta (1986, p. 16), however, written argumentation is an ‘exercise without real engagement’; it is a pure classroom genre with a series of codes, such as ‘Discuss’, which are pretences that bear little resemblance to authentic communicative practices. The sole-authored long essay as test of knowledge has evolved into a form that is different in style and purpose from every other print or digital culture text our students will be exposed to and asked to compose.

The most common challenge cited by students in academic writing is translating thought into writing (Llosa, Beck, & Zhao, 2011). Felton and Herko’s (2004) argumentative writing workshop study contrasts the energy students have for generating ideas and verbal argument compared to the inertia they feel when asked to write. For Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) the problem lies in students’ failure to recognise the differences between spoken and written argument, so that essays are marked by conversational patterns and a paucity of skills in building a two-sided argument in written form in the absence of a partner in dialogue. If the essay is not valued as a communicative form it may be very challenging for teachers to facilitate students’ transition through the thought to spoken to written process.
It is partly the essay’s status as a ‘high culture’ form that makes this transition challenging to many students (Newell et al., 2011), especially when compared to other more social and varied literary practices currently available. The pretence of an authoritative tone coupled with a deductive thesis-support structure may well close down understanding, learning, divergent thinking, genuine dialogue and lateral thought, and drive a wedge between students’ potential experience of subject English as ‘deepening understanding of the world’ as opposed to ‘getting better at writing English essays with ... precise text-and-evidence protocols’ (Pirie, 1997, p. 85). Moreover the framing of argument as polarised debate – whether in Parliament, school debating culture or popular culture – tends to ossify the process in terms of ‘winning or losing the struggle to define truth’ (Morgan & Beaumont, 2003, p. 148). Written argument is a particularly complex form of intertextual construct which depends on access to a range of cultural codes in order to see oneself as a potential contributor (Bolter, 1991).

In a digital culture where multimodal design and a multiplicity of voices is the norm, students do not see in the contemporary essay anything beyond a school-mandated externally tested and credentialled product devoid of communicative purpose. Katal (2012) refers to ‘the shifting contexts of student learning’ (p. 69), and relates his startling finding that for students in Hong Kong ‘schools were seen as places where their socialisation took place, and not places for ‘real’ learning’ (p. 68). The students in his study believed that their ‘real’ learning went on elsewhere, primarily on the internet via autonomous learning, and they perceived school-based learning as important ‘insofar as its accreditation function’. That is, they went along with it because they knew that had to write essays and the like for exams. These students had ‘dual learning worlds: one that is ongoing, relevant and real and another that is limited in its scope’ (p. 68). The students related that they felt they learnt ‘best’ from the internet.

Our current approach to the teaching of essay-writing is like an attempt to house the homeless by repeatedly showing them a building plan. Greetham (2001, p. 185), in a widely available guide, offers students ‘a simple formula for introductions’. According to Ljungdahl and March (2010, p. 262), an essay/exposition is ‘made up of an opening statement that describes the position taken (which) can be supported by evidence’. While formulaic learning may be important in the fields of music and sport, it leads to artificial writing – or McRorie’s dreaded ‘Engfish’ (discussed in Haluska, 2012) – if it is devoid of audience awareness. Most importantly the ubiquitous formulae, with their apothecosis in the five-paragraph essay do not actually ‘teach structure’ any more than ‘a paint by numbers kit teaches design’ (Pirie, 1997, p. 78). This single-minded emphasis on structure has diverted our attention from questions of style and rhetoric, audience and purpose, critical literacy and reflection; and it has taken the essay a long way from where it began.

According to Jean Sanborn (1994, p. 123) in ‘The essay dies in the academy, circa 1900’, Samuel Johnson’s mid 18th century pejorative characterisation of the essay as ‘a loose sally of the mind’ marks a key turning point in the rigidification of the essay that has led to present day practices. By the time Charles Sears Baldwin, Professor of Rhetoric at Columbia in 1909 could define it as an ‘orderly, logical development by paragraphs’ (cited in Sanborn, 1994, p. 124), the essay had come a long way from its oral roots in Classical Greek rhetoric where persuasive skills were married to a robust focus on the public debate of social, political and philosophical issues. Significantly for the present discussion, Plato’s dialogues blend the dialogic and the dialectic, the latter seen as subversive by the Athenian State in its ‘commitment to critical consideration of alternative views’ (Schwarz & Asterhan, 2010, p. 138). Between the 12th and 14th centuries these dialectical practices were reinvigorated by the Scholastic Movement and eventually took root in the first European universities. Very soon however, the dialogic elements had vanished as ‘a training in rhetoric and morals’ (Schwarz & Asterhan, 2010, p. 138) became the norm for the western elites and the production of dangerous knowledge was swept off the agenda.

Excepting a detour to Montaigne in the 1500s, there has been a steady path towards a mechanical structure devoid of dialogue, hesitancy, the personal and the political ever since. For Montaigne, from whose French ‘essaie’ – to ‘try’ or ‘attempt’ – we derive our ‘essay’, this form of writing was a personal response that combined interior musing with factual knowledge. According to Sanborn (1994), this alternative route lasted into the 18th and early 19th centuries where a greater affinity between literature and conversation provided the perfect context for a more ‘open’ form where the writer was encouraged to ‘try out’ ideas without the constraint of a detached pose. From the second half of the 19th century, however, as the essay came within the domain of schools and public examinations, form won out over
the investigation of ideas as subject English elbowed for room in the Academy by representing itself as a 'serious' social science (Pirie, 1997). Encouraged by a focus on the efficient and the scientific in the worlds of business and the Academy, conversation with the audience and any interplay of ideas not in the service of a thesis were gradually excluded. In the victory of the didactic academic essay in the hands of the great British essayists McCaulay, Cardinal Newman and Matthew Arnold, '[t]he exploratory essay has been dismissed and demeaned ... only the orderly, 'scientific' didactic essay is fit for the academy' (Sanborn, 1994, p. 126).

It is not going too far to say that the single greatest challenge facing a contemporary essay-writing student is to overcome this pedagogical and institutional conception of form and purpose that has become the norm over the last century. The essay as a mode of communication is removed from the personal lives of students, it is highly ritualised instead of authentic argumentation, and it is modelled on a restrictive adversarial conception that is doubly binding without a meaningful audience. Furthermore, communication is not helped by a narrow curricular focus on observable criteria, or the relations of power contained within contemporary assessment structures that militate against the authentic expression of opinion. This straitjacket – for both teachers and students – is particularly ironic in the light of the post-1980s focus on process writing with its manifesto of personal development, the social role of language and the avoidance of elite, prescriptive knowledge to focus on language for authentic purposes. In addition the genre approach, with its focus on deep structure as a means to agency, has contributed to a confusing array of approaches where ‘excessive concern with self-expression and creativity on the one hand, and excessive abstraction and technicality on the other’ (Moon, 2012, p. 45) have left the essay-writing student without an engaging and authentic means of written argument.

At its best the essay involves rigorous thought and preparation, evaluation and organisation, often under challenging constraints of time and space that build resilience and conceptual competency (Moody & Bobic, 2011). It conveniently doubles as a vehicle of self-expression and the default genre for differentiation and judgment of student work in the Humanities at senior secondary and tertiary level. As Pirie (1997) and Andrews (1995) argue, for example, the type of writing that will lead to success in the academic world must be taught to students, if only to allow access to that world. For students to gain a sense of agency in this domain, the essay should not be taught as a ‘transcendentally superior communication, but simply as one choice of form that has its own institutional purposes and limitations’ (Pirie, 1997, p. 91). To do this we will need to privilege mode of discourse over form, and that means argumentation.

**Part 2: Finding the Argument in the Essay**

Three recent publications attest to the growing international interest in argumentative reading and writing (Newell et al., 2011), argumentation and reasoning from a socio-cognitive perspective (Schwarz & Asterhan, 2010), and argumentation and education (Mirza & Perret-Clermont, 2009). The studies share an interest in argumentation as a specific set of skills to be learnt, and its potential for fostering learning across the curriculum. Schwarz and Asterhan (2010), for example, conclude that argumentative practices support the development of genuine reasoning development and improvements in conceptual understanding.

Argumentation is not only a key aspect of a student’s use of language to learn (Coffin, North, & Martin, 2009), it is a critical social practice that can drive argumentative writing and thereby reinvigorate the essay. Two approaches to developing a classroom and whole-school *orientation* to argumentation are explored in the following. These are: the explicit teaching of rhetoric and functional linguistics, and dialogic teaching. By using the outcomes and model units of the NSW English syllabus of the new Australian Curriculum as a springboard, it is time to consider what the essay could be in order to improve our students’ interests and skills in this area, as well as bring subject English into line with an increasingly sophisticated body of work on rhetoric and argumentation, writing instruction and digital literacy.

**Rhetoric**

Our single-minded emphasis on the structure of essay-writing has diverted our attention from questions of style; these are the considerations involving word choice, register, tone, balance of aesthetics and function, reason and emotion that allow students to ‘communicate their ideas without frustrating, boring or offending their readers’ (Moon, 2012, pp. 38–39). In this line of thinking, these aspects of style – which we could also refer to as Rhetoric – are a bridge between
formulaic genre and Romantic self-expression. Despite some popular connotations of the word as suggesting style over substance, rhetoric is in fact grounded in a practical tradition of social utility focused on the means for the individual to intervene socially in order to inform, motivate, entertain or persuade. For Moon, our failure to engage in this field reflects as much a lack of teacher knowledge as an endemic fear of explicit instruction.

Moreover a foregrounding of rhetoric in our preparation of students to write essays would align with a systemic-functional orientation towards the ways grammatical structures, lexical items and Hallidayan linguistic devices intertwine to realise interpersonal meaning (Llosa et al., 2011). Felton and Herko’s (2004, p. 679) quasi-experimental study of a ‘multistage argumentative writing workshop’, for example, involved the explicit teaching of Toulmin’s moves of position, claim, warrant and data – from his 1984 Introduction to Reasoning (discussed in Andrews, 1997, for example) – before a staged process of brainstorming, debate, argument for the opposing side, essay-writing and peer-review. Moon’s (2012) advocacy of aspects of the Classical approach such as imitation, mastery through practice and the links between language choice and audience, resonates well with Graham and Perin’s (2007) much-discussed overview of effective writing strategies. This recommends explicit strategy teaching as part of a process approach, and values a functional approach over the teaching of ‘grammar’ in the form of parts-of-speech and decontextualised sentence structure.

The learning Outcomes (BOS NSW, 2012a, pp. 52–61) for Stage 5 (Year 9–10) of the NSW English syllabus of the new Australian Curriculum suggest an orientation towards this approach within its umbrella ‘strand’ of ‘Language’. A student is expected to use language in ‘meaningful, contextualised and authentic ways’ incorporating linguistic ‘devices’ such as ‘nominalisation’. ‘The language of argument’ is to be understood and used and ‘adapted for different contexts’. These all point in the right direction, and it is the hope of this paper that teachers take a proactive stance in implementing these outcomes into units of work. It is gratifying that the Year 7 and 8 model unit sequences (English for the Australian Curriculum, n.d.) incorporate exercises on coherence and ‘adding credibility’ linked to Derewianka’s (2011) functional grammar-oriented resource for teachers. This focus disappears, however, from the Year 9 and 10 units, which is particularly troubling as the Year 10 unit has an essay-writing component. A teaching focus on rhetoric, supported by an explicit functional grammar, is a key to the social purpose that will help our students bring argumentative writing to life.

A dialogic approach

From dialogue to argument

For Pirie (1997, p. 78), structure will come not from formulas but from teachers ‘sitting down with students who have something they care about saying (and) helping them sort out how they might say it’. The utility of argument, in contrast to narrative, is that it implies a close relationship between composer and reader, primarily because its purpose is to change minds (Morgan & Beaumont, 2003). It is the dialogue between teacher and student, and between students, that lies at the heart of argumentation and makes it a powerful mode of discourse for both learning and preparing to write persuasively. The danger of students moving too loosely from verbal to written argument can be countered by making the move more of a conscious one, which of course depends on skills in rhetoric. For Andrews (1994) grounding the essay in vernacular speech and writing is an important way of making the ‘high’ form more accessible: the aim is a healthy blending of academic rigour and clarity with and the energy and emotion of authentic dialogue. Democracy, much like effective essay-writing, depends on open debate, consensus and the consideration and expression of different points-of-view; argument encourages us to move forward by the disciplined consideration of others’ ideas and responses (Andrews, 1994). In Kuhn and Crowell’s (2011) study, the explicit development of sophisticated, real-world dialogic argumentation skills such as counterfactual reasoning and the integration of opposing viewpoints was more effective in supporting essay-writing than the essay structure practice of their control group.

Productive argumentation in the classroom, according to Schwarz and Asterhan (2010), involves teachers’ facilitation of educationally dynamic speech acts, and their creation of a dialogic culture in the classroom. These authors conclude that an ‘adherence to dialogism makes it possible to implement argumentative practices in schools that champion (the) precedence of communication for mutual and reciprocal understanding over univocal rationalism’ (p. 140). This kind of argumentative practice aligns well with the more
‘open’ essay form of Montaigne; here a ‘loose sally’ is not such a denigration, and Andrews’ (1995) urging of new metaphors like dance and construction to replace the conception of argument as a battle, not only makes sense but suggests new possibilities for the teaching and learning of essay-writing. The academic essay for assessment purposes, and the essay as expression of socially and politically conscious opinion are then both possible outputs for the process of argumentation. Both, and not just the former, need to become a natural part of the diverse learning behaviours in every classroom (Felton & Herko, 2004).

From the digital to the dialogic
One potentially fertile teaching approach centred on dialogue is through its connections to digital culture. In a review of fifteen years of research in Argumentation-Based Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (ABCSCSL), Noroozi et al. (2012) found that interactive technologies successfully scaffolded and structured argumentative learning, though not without the careful pedagogical development of ‘rich’ ABCSCSL environments that are dialogic. Studies that have investigated chat rooms (Morgan & Beaumont, 2003) and digital graphic organisers like ‘Digalo’ (Schwarz & De Groot, 2007) report improvements in the coherency, decisiveness and openness of students’ argumentative writing as a result of the collaboration and time spent developing multiple arguments afforded by these digital tools.

Such benefits can go both ways. The digital brings with it a relevance to the students’ participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2006), the energy and plurality of multimodal literacies (Walsh, 2010) and enhanced avenues for authentic communication and reflection in Web 2.0 environments (Coffin et al., 2009). Argumentation in this context has the potential to enrich the production of knowledge (McGrath & Rowan, 2012), that is the great democratizing hope of the digital. Implied in this aspiration however is a constructive engagement in society and a quest for deep understanding, and not just information and display. A revitalised essay not only has a place in the world of hyperreality, as one possible enactment of an orientation towards argumentation, it may well help to ensure that the products of the knowledge-creation age are conceptual artefacts (Bereiter, 2002) and not ‘digital busy work’ (Bigum, 2002, p. 135).

The model units (English for the Australian Curriculum, n.d.) are highly student-centred and dialogic in approach, with the Stage 4 Year 7 unit on ‘Consumer Culture’ involving role-plays scaffolding persuasive manoeuvres and ending with a real-world authentic writing task. The Year 10 unit, however, is a missed opportunity. While it is an otherwise stimulating unit moving from personal response through research to a creative response, sequences such as the one addressing protest poetry only obliquely imply that the poem is itself an argumentative text. The causes of both the essay and the poem as objects of study and creation would be advanced if students could see that they are but two forms of the same mode of discourse. The opportunities for scaffolding argumentation as part of group discussion in sequence three are missed, the extended response of assessment task 1 is a cognitively lower-order ‘explain what they have learnt’, while have provided a perfect platform for communicative argumentation had the purpose, context and intended audience been more tightly conceived. With such strong potential through outcomes and model units it is disconcerting that a focus on argumentation is underdeveloped just as students are about to transition to senior school studies.

Conclusion
Units of work like these, and those we develop inspired by them, are important because an education that takes argumentation seriously will also prepare students for the one final pretend dialogue that is the essay as assessment. If we encourage our students to see themselves as ‘rhetors’ and facilitate this role with all the means at our disposal, then taking on the role of academic essay-writer, beginning a disciplined argumentation with an interested reader (who also happens to be a marker), will only benefit their essays. There is then no need to denigrate the essay, avoid it, or pretend it is not what it is. Students and teachers can approach it with integrity, and perhaps enthusiasm.

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References


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