CHAPTER SEVEN

Contrasting Conceptions of Essay-writing

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In every work regard the writer's end
Since none can compass more than they intend

Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*

Introduction

In the arts and social sciences, essay-writing is the undergraduate's Amazon. Throughout a degree course, the processes of studying often proceed along a river of coursework essays – the equivalent of one essay every ten days in some universities (Nimmo, 1977). Essay-writing occupies this central place within higher education because it serves two fundamental purposes: it is both a tool of assessment and an avenue to learning.

The coursework essay has not always had a part to play in assessment. Until the 1960s, the only essays which directly determined degree results were generally those written in final examinations where students wrote from memory under severe time constraints. Over the last two decades, however, formal recognition has increasingly been given to the 'coursework' essays which students write as part of their everyday studying. Compared to the exam answer, coursework essays give students an opportunity to draw upon a wide range of sources and allow time for sustained reflection. Collectively, therefore, they can play a part in assessment by providing a reliable record of the student's achievements over a substantial span of time. The adoption of coursework assessment has also been seen as a counter to the debilitating anxiety of 'sudden-death' examinations, although the consequences may be to redistribute stress throughout a course rather than to remove it altogether (see for example Heywood, 1969; Baumgart and Johnstone, 1974).

As a learning activity, essay-writing makes particularly exacting demands of the student. The student must not only apprehend and make sense of a topic, but go further and communicate what he or she knows within the framework of a formal, ordered statement. Essay-writing thus involves putting learning on display. But the task of constructing meaning is made doubly difficult because the student usually has to venture beyond the comparative security of lecture and seminar notes. Other sources have to be tracked down, digested, their relevance to the topic weighed in relation to all of the material at the student's disposal. Finally, what the student chooses to make use of has to be marshalled and deployed within a discussion of the topic. As a learning activity therefore, the process of essay-writing is inherently more complex than reading and listening, and its product may reflect even more strongly the personal sense which the student has made of what he or she has learnt.

These two purposes of learning and assessment co-exist uneasily. The potential for conflict was first shown in the classic American study *Making the Grade* (Becker *et al.*, 1968) which has already been referred to in Chapter 1. As one of the students interviewed observed:

> There's an awful lot of work being done up here for the wrong reason....
> There are a lot of courses where you can learn what's necessary to get the grade and when you come out of the class you don't know anything at all. You haven't learned a damn thing really. In fact, if you try to really learn something, it would handicap you as far as getting a grade goes ....
> (Becker *et al.,* 1968, p. 59).

This comment illustrates one of the main findings of Becker and his colleagues. The ways in which students went about learning were influenced by their pursuit of grades, and this could lead to a conflict between the requirements of grade-getting and students' desires to learn in a personally satisfying way. As Chapter 13, "The Context of Learning", will show, these tensions between learning and assessment seem to be a persistent phenomenon which has been found in many other studies.

A further source of tension has been less widely recognised. In discussing essay-writing, it is tempting to make inferences from other domains of written expression, but the parallels are sometimes too easily taken for granted. There is a gulf between, say, the specialist author and the undergraduate essay-writer which extends far beyond differences in knowledge or experience. The nub of the problem is the idiosyncrasy of essay-writing, which arises from the setting in which the activity takes place. Firstly, the knowledge of students is generally, though not invariably, inferior to that of their tutors. They may be hard pressed to communicate anything which the tutor does not already know. While the success of the specialist author comes from prompting readers to see some aspect of the world in a fresh way, the success of students may lie in the degree to which they can articulate and validate views of the world which are already familiar to the tutor. Secondly, specialist authors generally choose their own theme and write because they have something they want to communicate. For students, however, the initial stimulus comes from outside, not within. They are required to say something on a given theme whether or not they feel drawn to the topic and whether or not they feel they have something to say. Indeed, essay assignments are what Shaughnessy (1977) calls *stipulative*: not only topic but mode of expression, depth of treatment, sources, length and preparation time may all be specified in advance. These contextual features determine the conditions of studying in a formal educational setting, but they do not necessarily create an ideal medium in which learning can flourish. The student's concern to make sense of a problem may come into conflict with the obligations of the task as assigned. Britton and his colleagues have sketched out the consequences of conflict:

> The strategies a writer uses must be the outcome of a series of interlocking choices that arise from the context within which he writes and the resources of experience, linguistic and non-linguistic, that he brings to the occasion. He is an individual with both unique and socially determined experience,

attitudes and expectations; he may be writing voluntarily or, as is almost universally the case in the school situation, he may be writing within the constraints of a prescribed task. This he either accepts and *makes his own* in the process of writing, or he perfunctorily *fulfils his notion of what is demanded*, and his choices are likely to vary from occasion to occasion and from task to task.   (Britton *et al.,* 1975, p.9, my italics.)

So far we have looked at the incidence and purposes of essay-writing and the potential for conflict within it between learning and assessment and learning and studying. Viewed in any of these ways, essay-writing would seem to be a crucial area for discussion and investigation, yet what we find instead is a puzzling neglect. In some books on undergraduate teaching, essay-writing is hardly mentioned at all, while in others it has been consigned to the corner cupboards of "private study" or "marking problems". Even in study skills manuals, where essays are normally a prime concern, there is a preoccupation with form rather than substance. Accomplishment in essay-writing is often seen in terms of style or bibliographic finesse or as a matter of systematic planning and organisation. Amidst the flurry of technical tips, it is hard to get a sense of the student as a "maker of meaning" (Perry, 1977) or of writing as "a struggle to give meaning to experience" (Berger, 1979).

Previous Research

The neglect extends also to research (Hartley, 1980, p. 64). Most studies of undergraduate essay-writing derive from an interest in the reliability of essay-grading rather than in student learning (see Rowntree, 1977, pp. 188 ff.; and more recently Byrne, 1980). There are two notable exceptions. The first is a study by Hughes-Jones (1980) of students' perceptions of the reasons for success and failure in exams and essay work. Interest was a prominent factor in accounting for both successful and unsuccessful essays – a finding which echoes an earlier distinction between "involved" and "perfunctory" approaches to written work by secondary school pupils (Britton *et al.,* 1975). The second is a questionnaire study of the essay-writing procedures of 80 Psychology students (Branthwaite et al., 1980). The main findings of the study focus upon dimensions associated with academic success in general: one dimension involved "confidence, self-assertiveness and being in control, as opposed to being pessimistic, unenterprising and being externally constrained", while the other was typified by "the presence (or absence) of concentrated, individual hard work" (Branthwaite *et al.,* 1980, pp. 103-4). Other findings, however, are more specific to essay-writing. One of these concerns a difference between first- and second-year students: the second-years appeared to be "more product-orientated and more aware of the variety of ways in which one could go about essay-writing" (p. 104), and they were more likely to go beyond the recommended texts and to share their ideas with others. A marked mismatch was also found between what students felt tutors were looking for in essays and tutors' own criteria. While originality and understanding were high amongst the criteria advanced by students, none of the seven tutors who also took part in the study mentioned originality and only one mentioned understanding.

This lean harvest of findings reinforces rather than removes the impression of neglect. How students experience essay-writing, what the demands posed by essay-writing tasks might be, and what significant variations might exist between one discipline and another – all these are unexamined questions. As a learning activity, essay-writing remains virtually uncharted territory.

Background to the Study

In the remainder of this chapter, we begin to explore this territory, drawing upon the findings of a study of 17 second-year History undergraduates and 16 second-year Psychology undergraduates (Hounsell, 1984b). The students took part in two sets of semi-structured interviews, each focusing upon a recent essay prepared for a specific course module. The students were invited to describe both the content of the essay and how they went about preparing it, to draw comparisons and contrasts with other essays written for the course unit concerned, and to discuss various aspects of the activity of essay-writing and the course setting within which it took place. The students were invited to bring to the interviews copies of their essays and other associated notes and materials. In analysing the interview transcripts, the aim was to examine the students' experience of essay-writing as a learning activity against the backcloth of the two course settings. For reasons of space, the discussion which follows deals in the main with the findings for the History students. It outlines essay-practice within the course module concerned and the students' perceptions of the context in which they prepare their essays, as a preliminary to exploring the main findings of the study, which concern differences in the students' conceptions of what an essay is and what essay-writing involves.

Essay-Writing in a History Course

The History students are prolific essay-writers, spending on average almost two-thirds of their working time writing essays. Overall essay workloads vary as a function of different combinations of the five course modules taken by second year students, but some of the students say that they have to write a total of between 18 and 20 essays over the year as a whole. Within the particular course module investigated, students submit three essays of 2,000-2,500 words in the first two terms and an extended essay of 3,000-3,500 words in the final term. The average time spent on a History essay is 13-15 hours, but individual estimates range from eight hours in the case of one student to nearly 30 hours for another. Students normally have four weeks in which to prepare the essay, and the tutor for the course module usually recommends books to be consulted. Then, as one student says, "You go away and get on with it". The first three essays are linked to fortnightly seminars, where students submitting an essay summarise its contents and respond to questions. The fourth, 'extended' essay is prepared during the final term and draws on primary sources – for example, edited collections of documents such as correspondence and Acts of Parliament. Teaching during the term consists of four lectures, each of which introduces and comments upon one of the four topics assigned and relevant source documents.

The context in which essay-writing takes place is outwardly exceptionally well-organised. Essays are woven into the structure of the course module, titles are announced well in advance and allow some measure of choice, sources of reading are well-signposted and the tutor's written comments on essays are acknowledged as consistently thorough. In the students' perception, however, this is a less than ideal context for essay-writing. Most of the students not only comment on what they see as a heavy essay workload but feel this has unfortunate consequences for how their time is allocated. For example, (using fictitious names, here and elsewhere):

Tom: I mean, basically I'm a full-time essay-writer.

Edward: [The School of History emphasises] that you shouldn't concentrate on essays, because they're very narrowly focused, and you don't do yourself any good by concentrating on them. But everyone finds that, I mean, you've just got to do your essays. And they're the ones that get marked.... And that certainly doesn't give you enough time for general reading.

Moreover, there is a widespread feeling that the essay workload leaves little time to dwell on any one essay or to spend much time subsequently reflecting on the tutor's written comments. As Chris puts it:

I've got so many other things to do, (laughs), essays to do, I just sort of churn them out.... You know, think of something else, get on to something else.

In addition to this source of tension between learning and the requirements of studying and assessment, there is a further contextual feature which is striking. Although students may discuss an essay with the tutor individually if they wish, this is an opportunity which is only very seldom taken up. Equally, the students say either that they do not discuss their essays with one another or that if they do so, discussion is never about content or how one might approach a particular essay:

Martin: It's all centred around marks, really.

Graham: They talk to each other about how they haven't finished it on time, and, oh, 'I have to get an extension [to the deadline]', and this kind of thing. But they don't actually discuss essays.

Essay-writing seems therefore an essentially private activity. There is evidently little or no discussion amongst students of the problems or processes it entails.

Conceptions of Essay-Writing

In analysing the interviews, the unit of analysis initially adopted was that of the individual essay task. The aim was to look for evidence of differences in how students went about essays which might parallel the well-established distinction between deep and surface approaches to academic reading (see Chapter 3). As the analysis proceeded, however, it became apparent that essay-writing, as an activity,

had distinctive meanings for the students which extended beyond the particularities of any one essay assignment and which lent a broadly consistent character to their essay-writing. In other words, the most fundamental difference to emerge from the interview analysis lay in the students' *conceptions* of what an essay was and what essay-writing involved in the discipline concerned. In the case of the History students, three qualitatively distinct conceptions were identified, and these can be summed up as *argument*, *viewpoint* and *arrangement*. At the core of each conception is a global or overall definition of an essay, and it is this definition which gives the conception its distinctive character.

The essay as argument

This, the most sophisticated of the three conceptions, is represented in the following examples:

Chris: Being able to construct an argument, that's where for me, this plan sheet here is, like, the key to that because, I get everything in a logical order where everything's building up, you know, and point 1, boom, boom, boom, boom, like that. And so I try to aim that, come the end of the essay, that no matter what they thought before that, the logic of the argument and the evidence produced is such that, even if they don't agree with my interpretation, they've got to say it's reasonable, reasonably argued. And I think that's one of the things I'm good at, is argument, and constructing an argument.... Tutors aren't looking for sort of, eloquence of style and so on, it's more the argument you present providing it's fairly clear.

Tom: [The tutor] will be looking for a very well-structured essay, very well-balanced. [The tutor] likes you to, you know, weigh the evidence up and come to some sort of conclusion.

Will: ... Whereas in an essay you really have to think about something, and then... well, just keep thinking about it as regards to all the reading and the evidence you're going to use.

Interviewer: So it stimulates you to think in a way you don't get from other things?

Will: Well, you have to follow a coherent argument, basically. And that's the only time you have to – like in a lecture you don't and in a seminar you just usually state your point of view on a certain point. You don't form an actual, coherent argument, along a broad theme, really.

Each of these students seems to share a common definition of an essay, seen as *an ordered presentation of an argument well-supported by evidence*. And if we penetrate beyond this global characterisation, three sub-components of the definition can be disentangled. The most important of these is an interpretive sub-component:

Graham: [Essays] crystallise your ideas on a topic. You learn to put forward a logical argument.

Edward: You've got to look for arguments, and prove yourself. I wrote an essay last term in English, and I didn't even use a textbook for it, I just used a text. And I got as good a mark for that, or as good comments, as I would for any History essay. And yet for me it was just reading a text and putting my own opinion forward. Whereas in History I mean you've got to take other people's ideas, and mould them into your own argument.

Essays are thus seen as concerned with the presentation of an argument in which ideas have been "moulded" or "crystallised", as these students put it, into a single entity. An argument therefore pivots upon a distinctive position or point of view on a problem or issue. Within this global definition, the interpretive sub-component is superordinate, subsuming the other two sub-components. The first of these is an organisational one. A distinctive point of view is not merely advanced but presented in a way which is "coherent" or "logical":

Edward: Conclusions are just, you've really got to just tie everything together then, you've got all your strands of argument. But then conclusions, since I've come to University they've become less important, I think, 'cos your argument should be developing all the way through the essay anyway.

This sub-component therefore reflects a concern with an essay as an integrated whole, in which the point of view to be presented underpins and informs the structural conventions of introduction, main text and conclusion.

The second of the two subordinate sub-components of the definition is concerned with data in the form of evidence substantiating or refuting a particular position or point of view. For an argument to be authentic, it must be demonstrated and buttressed by supporting evidence:

Kate: ... I think I've got a balanced argument, a convincing argument, putting in enough facts, and reference points, to back up what you're saying... I suppose I could've written the essay saying that the court and country divisions were very pronounced by this time, and if I'd been able to back it well enough, then logically I should get the same mark, but I don't really think that that view is convincing enough to be able ... to present it.

This global definition, therefore, can be seen as comprising three sub-components, representing specific stances towards three elements of essay-writing:

Data	The subject-matter which provides the raw material or bedrock of essays.
Organisation	The structuring of essay material into a discussion of the topic which follows a particular sequence or order.
Interpretation	The meaning or meanings given to essay material by the student.

These three elements, which emerged from intensive analysis of the interview transcripts of both the History and the Psychology students, may be considered as *core elements* of essay-writing. They are crucial to an understanding of any given global definition of an essay in two ways. Firstly, the particular stance adopted

towards each core element forms a sub-component of the global definition. And secondly, the character of the definition is also determined by the interrelationship of these sub-components. In the global definition we have just examined, organisation and data are hierarchically related to interpretation, since decisions on how the essay is to be organised and what evidence is to be marshalled are dependent on the distinctive point of view to be adopted; but this is not always the case, as we shall see.

The essay as viewpoint

At first glance the conceptions of *argument* and *viewpoint* might seem to entail the same definition of an essay:

Alan: There must be a technique to writing the perfect essay. Um, I suppose you've got to have a clearly defined argument and a plan of what you're going to do, already written down, so you can always refer back to it, and then start from there.

Rick: It's a discipline to getting it, to getting your argument down on paper in a constructive and in a literate sort of fashion . . . If you didn't do an essay at all and just had tutorials, instead of essays, you'd then learn more but you wouldn't be able to express it so well.

Indeed, both definitions share a concern to present a distinctive point of view and a concern with essays as integral wholes. What sets them apart, however, is the sub-component of data. In the case of two of the five students associated with this conception, the role of data in essays is not explicitly considered. References to data are very sparse and take the most indirect of forms. For the remaining three students, there are some indications that the function of data as evidence has been acknowledged, but the general impression is one of a lack of concern with this sub-component. In this conception, therefore, the global definition reflects only the alliance of interpretation to organisation: an essay is seen as *the ordered presentation of a distinctive viewpoint on a problem or issue*.

The essay as arrangement

Within the conception *arrangement*, an essay is defined as *an ordered presentation embracing facts and ideas*. This definition is largely tacit rather than made explicit by the students concerned. It is strongly implied in the students' accounts of their essay-writing procedures (analysed below), and it can be gleaned too from an examination of its sub-components.   In the stance taken towards interpretation, ideas are viewed disjunctively, as collections of essentially discrete thoughts. It is considered useful or important in an essay to express whatever ideas or opinions one might have, but there is no concomitant concern to marry related ideas to form a unified position or point of view:

Donna: I think [tutors] are asking us to look at secondary sources and just see what we think about them. But – they do want our own ideas, but I think it's limited when you've only got secondary sources.

Sue: What's distinctive is that I'm here expressing myself, and what I thought, and what my ideas are, in certain subjects, on paper. It's very important to know, it's a gauge how well the course is going. Obviously if you're not coming up with the right ideas, or certain ideas, and aren't able to express yourself, then I think that obviously you've got problems.

The references to organisation are characteristically flat, expressing a commitment to essay structure which is apparently devoid of any consideration of what organising principles might be appropriate:

Pattie: I usually start off with a quote, and then finish with a quote. I find that's the easiest way to start it. But I think the worst thing is starting an essay. Once you get halfway through you're alright. The first few pages . . .

And where there is a concern with data, the standpoint is at base a quantitative one, displaying a conscientious coverage of sources rather than a regard for evidence supporting a point of view:

Interviewer: What do you see as your strengths as an essay-writer?

Pattie: ... I think, the um, the presentation: I tend to put quite a few quotes in, and put them down as references.

Interviewer: What's studying History at University about?

Donna: I'm not quite sure what it is. I don't know. I don't think we get a lot of our own ideas into it. I know we're supposed to but we seem to be reading books, and criticising what people think, more than actually — it's sometimes annoying when you're doing an essay, and you don't really know enough facts, but what you're doing is sorting out other people's interpretations, and you feel that you can't really criticise them yourself because you don't know the source material. And so, um . . . I don't know. It just seems to me as though you're reading about a period, and trying to fit your reading into an essay. It just seems like a lot of facts more than anything else.

Finally, what also typifies this global definition is the lack of integration between the three sub-components. In the first two contrasting conceptions, it is the articulation of a distinctive point of view or position which gives an essay its fundamental meaning: the sub-components of organisation (in the *viewpoint* conception) or of organisation and data (in the *argument* conception) are the vehicles upon which this interpretive stance is conveyed. A decisive characteristic of essay-writing as *arrangement*, however, is that the three sub-components are not hierarchically related. Indeed, interpretation, in the form of whatever ideas and thoughts one has, assumes an almost incidental status relative to the other two sub-components of organisation and data.

Essay-Writing Procedures

Thus far we have looked at differences in conception in relation to how History essays are defined by the students. But we can also find evidence of such

differences in the students' essay-writing procedures. We look firstly at essay preparation — the initial stages of reading, taking notes, and clarifying what will be said in the essay.

When a student conceives of essays as arguments, as in the following example, the elements of interpretation ("his argument", "you make a case") and data ("you've got to back it up with actual facts") are seen in interrelation:

Interviewer: What are you looking out for in individual chapters? What will you be getting from them?

Chris: Well, really things that are relevant to the question in hand. I try to find the author's own particular view, his argument, and also really just to really plunder it for facts. Whether the facts that he gives, you know, whether I agree with his argument or not, I think that the main thing in an historical essay anyway is that you make a case and back it up with actual facts of what happened, and evidence. Sometimes I just go through a book very quickly and just jot down fact after fact after fact, and, you know, events, what people said, or sometimes I write out quotes, from the time. What people actually did and said. And then I have a good body of things that actually happened that I can then . . . use to support what I want to say. So in a book I'm looking for A, his argument, and then B, facts and evidence.

Preparing an essay therefore entails being attentive both to arguments and to evidence, and the essay emerges out of the interplay between these.

In a conception of essays as viewpoints, however, the element of data is much less in focus, and there may be indications that reading is directed by a preconceived view of the line the essay will take:

Martin: Well, I must admit, I had a set idea on the question. And so I went in with that attitude, I got the books, um, again, the same process of going through them, doing the reading, taking notes, analysing, condensing the notes down and then writing the essay out. I mean, it's much the same process, and I knew that it was what [the tutor] had thought as well... It was exactly what [the tutor] thought, but I believed in it myself as well.

or even that the interplay of interpretive stance and supporting data is deliberately overridden:

Rick: Usually, on the whole, I try and make the facts fit my argument anyway, sort of, or I try and start with the argument in my head anyway. I'll change it, you know, the facts they say...

Where essays are seen as arrangements on the other hand, the procedures described seem uninformed by an interpretive focus. Material is assembled in relation to the topic assigned rather than a point of view to be advanced, as in the following account of an essay entitled 'How greatly did English government and administration differ at the end of Henry VIII's reign from the beginning?':

Frank: [I chose this question because] it was one that I could deal with systematically, in a way. I could deal with you know, Privy Council, financial

administration, Parliament, all these things in turn. It's reasonably easy for research, that sort of thing.... I already knew a bit about the subject from lectures, so I had a good idea of what I was going to do in the first place. So basically I was collecting the different things I was going to deal with; just put them down on a piece of paper, used the indexes of books, looked it up, and then I dealt with each in turn, collecting material from the different books. I did that ... in rough, and then, when I copied it up, like this, you know, ironed it out a bit, and reorganised it, and put it how I wanted it.

The absence of an explicit interpretive focus is similarly evident in the construction of essay answers, where the students' accounts appear flat and mechanical. There is no apparent criterion underpinning the arrangement of the material:

Pattie: You don't put any waffle in, you don't put anything in that's not necessary, not needed, 'cos you just . . . you just try and let it flow.

Donna: I read through my notes and try to split it up into sections, so that I can get an essay plan. And then I number the sections. It'll just be usually 1, 2, 3, 4, and sort of, how I argue the name to the group, whatever it is, say, religious conflict, and go down like that. It might not necessarily be in the right order, but then I'll mark it through, and then I'll decide what order it's in. I usually get – probably not in the right order, but it's hard sometimes because various topics merge into each other and you never know how to separate it. Sometimes there's no distinct line, and you get, put bits in the wrong bits, and things like that.

Alternatively, the problem of organisation is side-stepped, either by resorting to a chronological sequence or, as in the example below, through reliance on an external source:

Sue: If I haven't formulated a very definite plan, and if I'm not quite sure how my essay's going to go, then I'll probably take a main theme in a book and work through that way. I mean in History you might have a problem about whether to deal with ideas, sort of, a chronology, which approach to use.... And if I have got a problem like that, then I'll use the authority, you know, the book, and work through their way.

Where by contrast the conception is of essays as arguments or viewpoints, questions of organisation and interpretation are seen as interrelated. The structure of the essay is determined by and subservient to the distinctive position or point of view advanced, as in an account of an essay entitled 'Was Tudor Government at any time a despotism?':

Alan: Well first of all I did an introduction, 'What is a despotism?' And then sort of blasted down a few characteristics, then I discussed these . . ., like, that uh, that Tudor Government wasn't based upon Divine Right, it was based upon the law. Then I went on to discuss the argument for Tudor despotism, and then try and take, uh, the elements of those who argued for, and argued against them. I tried to keep to the argument, keep the argument very trimmed and streamlined.... My conclusion was, the Tudor

Government wasn't a despotism because these particular characteristics of despotism weren't fulfilled.

Striving for a unity of essay structure and interpretive stance also entails attention to the parts which make up the whole:

Kate: Every paragraph, I sort of make sure I'm making a relevant point. Is it clear what point I'm making or am I just waffling?

There is an obvious parallel here with what Laurillard (1978) and Ramsden (1981) in their descriptions of a deep approach have called, respectively, "keeping the end-point in mind throughout the solution process" and "integrating the parts into a whole".

Essay Content

If the differences identified in the students' conceptions of essay-writing are valid, then we should also expect indications of these differences in their accounts of essay content. These accounts could not be analysed in their entirety because of the large number of essay topics tackled and the almost limitless range of library sources upon which the students could draw, but it was feasible to adopt the stratagem of focusing upon essay conclusions as the key criterion. This analysis showed that, generally speaking, when asked about their conclusions, in the *argument* conception the students stated what their conclusion to an essay was, while in the *viewpoint* conception the conclusion was stated or students said they had arrived at a conclusion but did not specify what this was. Where the students held the *arrangement* conception, on the other hand, they either did not refer to any conclusion, said the essay was not concluded, or outlined a conclusion which merely reiterated the substance of the essay title.

The analysis of essay content was also taken a stage further, however, by scrutinising the students' 'extended' essays, which were confined to four topics. The overriding aim was to look at the extent to which the essays mirrored conceptions, regardless — it should be stressed — of the historical plausibility of the content or its accuracy. Here only two examples are discussed, both of which are essays on the topic 'What were the main sources of friction between Charles II and the Cavalier Parliament, and how far were they inherent in the Restoration Settlement?'. The essays are respectively by Chris and Frank. As a result of the analysis of the interview data, Chris was ascribed to the *argument* and Frank to the *arrangement* conception.

Chris's essay

Chris's essay comprises 17 paragraphs totalling 4,200 words. It begins with what he subsequently describes as a "brief overview of the constitutional arrangements of the Restoration Settlement".

The opening paragraph outlines events from Charles' arrival in Dover in May 1660 to the election of the Cavalier Parliament twelve months later. Paragraph 2 suggests that the "underlying premiss" of the Restoration Settlement was "the

PANEL 7.1   *Chris's essay, 5th paragraph*

PANEL 7.2   *Chris's essay, concluding paragraph*

This brief overview of the constitutional arrangements of the Restoration Settlement gives the impression that the future should be promising enough, but by the middle of the decade the honeymoon euphoria had evaporated, and sharp conflicts between crown and parliament had emerged, despite the amelioration and promise of the Restoration. Nevertheless, it is misleading to think of the relations between Charles and the Cavalier Parliament as one of constant friction, because there were many issues that caused no friction and long periods of give and take and relaxed relations in which the process of government functioned quite well. But for the purposes of this discussion I shall concentrate on areas of conflict, even though this may give a distorted impression of relations between King and Parliament. As we shall see, all but one of the sources of these conflict areas were inherent in the Restoration Settlement. There were areas of ambiguity in the Settlement which led to friction over finance, the use of suspending and dispensing power, and the armed forces. Then there were two main areas of out-and-out conflict; the religious controversy and foreign policy. I shall deal with each issue in turn by considering its relation to the Restoration Settlement and by tracing its development during the life-time of the Cavalier Parliament, although it will quickly be seen that all these issues overlapped and affected one another.

We have identified five principal sources of friction between Charles and the Cavalier Parliament that we have also seen were to some extent inherent in the Restoration Settlement. The areas of ambiguity in the settlement, that is: finance, the armed forces and the prerogative rights of suspending and dispensing power and of determining foreign policy were areas that left room for a considerable development of royal power. However, when the Crown attempted to enhance its power by exploiting these ambiguities and by exercising its prerogative rights, which though not formally confirmed by the Restoration were assumed to have been maintained, Parliament rose to the challenge, attacked and usually prevailed. Religion was the one area w[h]ere specific Restoration legislation directly led to conflict since the overwhelming Anglican resurgence represented by the Act of Uniformity and the Clarendon Code was committed to fighting any Pro-Catholic and Pro-French policies of the King even though it involved an unprecedented invasion of the royal prerogative. This reveals the shallowness of the Restoration's upholding of royal supremacy in the constitution. Nevertheless, the conflicts of the 1660s and 1670s did not spark off another civil war since they were all kept at the political level and the Restoration Settlement held together despite two changes of dynasty in 1689 and in 1714 because Parliament had become the lynch-pin of government.

belief that historical events were cyclical" and a widespread belief that the country had returned to its situation prior to the 1641-2 crisis. The legislation of the intervening years had thus been nullified or its status clarified "in an attempt to construct a lasting settlement". Paragraphs 3 and 4 go on to outline the principal legislative measures of the Restoration Settlement enacted by the Cavalier Parliament.

Paragraph 5 (see Panel 7.1) sets the previous discussion in context and indicates the course which the remainder of the essay will follow. While "this brief overview", Chris says, might give the impression of a "promising enough" future, sharp conflicts had emerged by the middle of the decade. Chris goes on to sketch out his view of the essay question, identifying five sources of friction categorised in two groupings. This framework explicitly maps out the sequence adhered to in the remainder of the essay. First, Chris discusses areas of conflict which arose from ambiguities in the Settlement: finance (paras 6, 7 and 8), the armed forces (paras 9, 10 and 11) and suspending and dispensing powers (para. 12). Second, he deals with areas of out-and-out conflict: the religious controversy (paras 13-15), and foreign policy (para. 16).

The concluding paragraph of Chris's essay is shown in Panel 7.2, and recapitulates the five principal sources of friction discussed. Furthermore, returning to a distinction he had made in paragraph 5, Chris states that religion was the only

one of the five areas where specific Restoration legislation directly led to conflict. Chris ends with some general observations about the constitutional maintenance of the royal supremacy and the containment of the conflicts of the period.

Having summarised this essay, we can analyse it by trying to assess how far it reflects a conception of essays as argument in relation to the three sub-components of the global definition.

Interpretation. Chris clearly takes up a distinctive position or point of view on the essay question. He responds to the first part of the question by identifying five main sources of friction which he categorises in two groups, and he responds to the second part of the essay question by seeing all five areas as to some extent inherent in the Restoration Settlement, but with the area of religion seen as a special case.

Organisation. The essay is underpinned by an explicit interpretive framework, announced in advance as a preliminary to a more detailed examination, and reiterated in the essay's concluding paragraph. The essay thus mirrors a concern with essays as integral wholes. Introduction, main text and conclusion share the same organising principle, which is founded upon the interpretive position which Chris advances.

Data. Similarly the bulk of the factual references which appear in the essay are aligned to Chris's interpretive framework. References to relevant data are subsumed within each point raised, and thus become the evidence which substantiates each of these points. The opening four paragraphs are the single exception, but since they are described as providing the background to the constitutional arrangements of the Restoration Settlement, their evidential status and their relation to the main concerns of the essay are clearly specified.

Frank's essay

Frank's essay comprises 33 paragraphs totalling 3,700 words. The opening paragraph, shown in Panel 7.3, can be seen as the introduction to the essay.

PANEL 7.3   *Frank's essay, opening paragraph*

> The years of the Cavalier Parliament, which opened in 1661 and was not dissolved until 1679, were marked by increasing points of friction between King Charles ll and Parliament on such crucial matters as the political and religious settlements, foreign policy and the royal finances, many of which were related to the question of the balance of power between King and Parliament.

Frank notes the growing friction between sovereign and Parliament on "such crucial matters as the political and religious settlements, foreign policy and the royal finances", and comments that many of these were linked "to the question of the balance of power between King and Parliament". The paragraphs which succeed it represent an implicit structure which is adhered to throughout the essay. Paragraphs 2-32 follow a clear chronological order beginning with the Convention Parliament in 1660 and ending with the dissolution of the Cavalier Parliament in 1679. The majority of these paragraphs start from or are focused upon one or more Acts of Parliament, Parliamentary measures, Treaties, or Declarations by the Crown, (17 paragraphs in total); or they deal with a series of events such as those surrounding the impeachments of Charles' First Minister, Clarendon, in 1667 (4 paragraphs) and of Danby in 1678-79 (2 paragraphs). At intervals throughout the essay, a small number of paragraphs (paras 3, 18, 27) set earlier or later paragraphs within a broader context. Paragraph 18, for example, foreshadows the topics of foreign policy, religion and money which are prominent in succeeding paragraphs.

Panel 7.4 shows the final paragraph. Frank concludes that the period saw "much friction [between King and Parliament] in such fundamental and interrelated issues as religion, the political settlement, finance and foreign policy".

PANEL 7.4   *Frank's essay, concluding paragraph*

> The years of the Cavalier Parliament saw much friction between Parliament and the King's government in such fundamental and inter-related issues as religion, the political settlement, finance and foreign policy. The result, by 1678, was a strongly Anglican, anti-Catholic religious settlement with a uniform Anglican Church based on the Book of Common Prayer, and the end of religious toleration. A strongly royalist political settlement was initially introduced although this was partly eroded by Parliament's increased use of their power of the purse to control the government's policies, particularly in the raising of armies and hence in war and peace, and their use of statue to scotch the King's tolerant and pro-Catholic policies. The outcome of the Restoration Settlement, therefore, reflects the friction between King and Parliament in these years, particularly over religious toleration and the closely connected Catholic problem.

He suggests that this resulted in "a strongly Anglican, anti-Catholic religious settlement" and that the initially strongly royalist political settlement became eroded by increasing intervention by Parliament. The outcome of the Restoration Settlement therefore "reflects the friction between King and Parliament in these years", particularly on questions of religion.

Interpretation. There is little to indicate that Frank has taken up the distinctive position or point of view characteristic of a conception of essays as argument. Four areas of friction are suggested in both the introductory and concluding paragraphs of the essay, but these are tagged on each occasion with the phrase "such as" rather than explicitly identified as the main sources of friction. Similarly, the second part of the essay question is only touched upon in the final sentence of the essay, where a connection is posited between one area of friction and the Settlement, but no assessment is made of how far the former was inherent in the latter. In sum, then, the interpretative component seems closest to the incidental thoughts and ideas characteristic of a conception of essay-writing as arrangement.

Organisation. There are intermittent references throughout the essay to areas of friction (religious toleration, for example, and foreign policy) but these do not provide a framework underpinning the essay. The structure followed is a chronological one in which specific parliamentary measures or sets of events mark out the route the discussion follows. In sharp contrast to Chris's essay, therefore, the organising principle adopted is not determined by the essay's interpretative stance. A concern with essays as integrated wholes would not, of course, be invalidated by a chronological sequence if there were also an attempt to relate the chronological account to the focal issue of the main sources of friction and their degree of inherence in the Restoration Settlement. However, Frank's stance towards the focal issue is unclear and the links between introduction, main text and conclusion are not clarified.

Data. For similar reasons, the use of data seems informed by quantitative considerations rather than selected as evidence confirming or refuting an identifiable position or point of view.

Conceptions and Approaches

Amongst this group of seventeen History students, three distinct conceptions of essay-writing were identified. These differences in conception were apparent in how an essay was defined, in the students' essay-writing procedures, and in the content of their essays. The criteria adopted in the interview analysis have also been validated by two independent judges [1]. Similar differences in conception have been found amongst the group of Psychology students who took part in the larger investigation, and both sets of findings are discussed elsewhere – in relation to essay planning (Hounsell, 1984a), the quality of feedback (Hounsell, 1987), and the notion of academic discourse (Hounsell, 1988).

The differences in the History students' conceptions are reflected in their combined coursework essay mark for the History course module concerned. Taking only the fourteen students who can be ascribed without qualification to one of the three conceptions, four of the five students with an arrangement conception have marks below 60 per cent, while all four students ascribed to the viewpoint conception have marks in the range 60–64 per cent. Only two students have marks of 65 per cent or more, and both are students assigned to the argument conception. There is no striking relationship with final degree results, but any such link would inevitably be tenuous, since the course module investigated forms only a part of each student's scheme of studies and assessment is strongly weighted towards examination performance. What, then, of the relationships between these and other findings on student learning?

The conceptions which have been identified are of essay-writing as an activity embracing more than a single essay task. As descriptions of students' experience, therefore, they occupy conceptual ground between, on the one hand, the generic conceptions of learning described by Säljö (see Chapters 3 and 6), and on the other, the contrasting conceptions of a specific learning task represented in a deep and surface approach. And as we might in consequence expect, there are conceptual links which span this spectrum of constructs.

Firstly, the most sophisticated conceptions of learning and of essay-writing entail definitions which are made explicit. The students can readily articulate and discuss the activity as they conceive of it. The activity has therefore become an "object of reflection" (Säljö, 1982) which can be appraised and tackled purposely. Secondly, to conceive of essays as arguments is to see oneself as a "maker of meaning". An essay offers a way of understanding or making sense of a problem or issue which is interpretatively distinct, logically coherent, and firmly rooted in the available evidence. In this *argument* conception, then, as in both a deep approach and a thematic conception of learning, there is a concern to abstract and construct meaning through an active engagement with the subject-matter.

The quest for meaning is also characteristic of a conception of essays as *viewpoints*, but the holistic focus of a deep approach is here only partly manifested. Ideas are interrelated and integrated but interconnections between interpretation and data tend to be unplumbed or overridden. The completed essay may constitute an ordered argument underpinned by evidence, but has not grown out of a consideration of the range of interpretive options open. This conception also shares the defining features of the multistructural level in the SOLO taxonomy referred to in Chapter 2. At this level, as applied to examples of learning tasks in History, inconsistencies or conflicts encountered in data are ignored or discounted so that a firm conclusion can be reached (Biggs and Collis, 1982, pp. 36 ff.).

Contrasting observations can be made concerning the *arrangement* conception where the definition of an essay tends to be tacit and implied, and where essay-writing seems to involve passively restating and regurgitating what has been gleaned from source materials rather than attempting to make coherent sense of them. This closely parallels Säljö's first and second conceptions in which learning has an essentially factual and reproductive character and is, as Säljö has noted elsewhere, largely "taken-for-granted" (Säljö, 1982, pp. 76-82). Furthermore, in both the arrangement conception and a surface approach, the activity is seen unreflectively and mechanically. Material is collected, ideas are advanced, and the discussion is given a structure; but these subsist as a collection of discrete procedures which lack a unifying purpose. The meaning of an essay lies less in what it says than in what the completed essay represents: outward stipulations met, a course requirement fulfilled. This constitutes learning as studying but not learning-as-understanding.

Conceptions and the Study of History

Of the three conceptions identified, it is the conception of essay-writing as argument which is espoused by the School of History. First-year students are advised that "Writing an essay is an exercise in handling historical evidence and building it into a convincing argument", and in our own investigation this same concern was expressed in comments by the tutor on individual essays. How is it, then, that two other conceptions apparently persist, especially when the students are such prolific essay-writers?

In the case of the students who see essay-writing as *arrangement*, the very frequency with which essays are prepared may help to account for the persistence of the conception. As the earlier discussion of context showed, the History students' opportunities for reflection seem limited: essay-writing is an essentially private activity and the need to "churn the essays out", as one student puts it, leaves little room to dwell on the merits or demerits of any one assignment. The consequences may be especially acute as far as this particular sub-group is concerned, for what also distinguishes these students is a perceived gap between their aspirations and what they achieve in their essays, combined with uncertainty about what essay-writing entails. And since the School and the tutor explicitly indicate what is required in a History essay, the uncertainty these students feel cannot evidently

be resolved by information-giving, but represents a more fundamental problem. Indeed, there is an echo here of Säljö's analysis in Chapter 6. The students do not share the premises of their teachers, and so fail to grasp the messages the teachers convey about the nature of essay-writing (Hounsell, 1987), as the following comment seems to illustrate:

Interviewer: What do you think the tutor was looking for in this essay?

Sue: He's obviously looking for a much more sort of, detailed approach, I would say. Although on my last essay he did say that I spent too much time explaining things, and I ought to be arguing and interpreting more, and so I was trying to argue and interpret all the way through this, as well as obviously having to bring in details. And I just wondered if by doing that I haven't tended to generalise a bit. Because when I start to argue and interpret I generalise a little bit.... I think he's looking for argument and interpretation, I just think he's expecting a lot of, uh, more detail perhaps as well.

In the case of the students who see essays as *viewpoints*, however, the persistence of the conception may be indicative of a more general orientation to academic studies of the kind discussed in Chapter 5. These students tend to place a premium on originality and to see essay-writing as a medium for self-expression. To Alan, for example, writing an essay can be fulfilling because "It's a work of art. [*Ironically*]. Your latest album's coming out next week". For these students, interpretation is closely bound up with their own ideas, thoughts and feelings.

Interpretation is also given pride of place by the students who conceive of essay-writing as *argument*, but the latter talk not simply of "what I argued" or "my argument" but of "the argument" and of "having an argument". It is as if their interpretive stance has taken on an objective existence: it is no longer "my argument" but something which might be argued by any individual on the basis of the evidence presented. Equally strikingly, this seems linked to a further characteristic of these students, summed up in Graham's comment that learning to put forward a logical argument in an essay is very important because "it's what History's all about". These students seem to share the view of Bennett (1974) that:

The difference between the scholar's book and the candidate's answer is, in History at any rate, almost entirely one of degree and hardly at all one of kind, for both are products of the same type of thought and both are judged in the same way. (Bennett, 1974, p. 1)

This perspective upon essay-writing can be seen as a way of coming to terms with the tensions between learning and studying and learning and assessment outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Whatever reservations these particular students may have about their essay workload and its consequences, they see themselves as practitioners, in their essay-writing, of the discipline of History. And perhaps too, in mastering the fundamentals of argument, the students have transcended the discipline; for argument is a universal of academic discourse and the currency of reasoned debate in society at large.

Note

1. In deciding the appropriate category to assign an essay, each judge was given a set of coding instructions and a sample of uncoded interview extracts. The level of agreement reached, without consultation, was 84 per cent in both cases.