

Tracing the shape of argumentative essay teaching in Australian university essay-writing guides

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The academic essay has an enduring place within assessment practice in higher education due to its focus on critical thinking development. Despite its significance, research shows that students still struggle to meet teacher expectations. Much of the existing higher education research in Australia and elsewhere has focused on student performance of critical thinking outcomes associated with essay writing. To date, there has been little focus on the way essay writing is conceived of and taught by higher education teachers and its possible impact on student learning. This paper considers the results of a research project that explores teaching conceptions and approaches to argumentative essay-writing as represented in Australian essay-writing guides. Thirty publically available, guides were purposively selected from a range of Australian universities. Guides were chosen as a textual representation of teaching conceptions and approaches related to argumentative essay writing. Each guide was analysed using Biggs' Presage, Process Product (3P) learning and teaching model as a lens. A thematic analysis showed a range of practice related to the way argumentative essay writing is contextualised, and the way critical thinking and argumentation are conceptualised and developed as part of this assessment task. In this paper, it will be argued that the way argumentative essay writing is represented in some guides may result in learning activities that do not align with intended outcomes. The conclusion indicates a need for further research about the teaching of argumentative essay-writing.