



Essaying the essay: Nursing scholarship and the hegemony of the laboratory

Lyn Gardner, Gary Rolfe*

College of Human and Health Sciences, Swansea University, UK

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SUMMARY

It might appear odd or even perverse to be arguing for the essay as a vehicle for academic thought and writing, particularly given the current emphasis on scientific research and evidence-based practice. In fact, the scholarly essay has virtually ceased to exist as an academic form in practice disciplines such as nursing, excluded by what we will identify and refer to as the hegemony of the laboratory. In a practical as well as an intellectual attempt to reinstate it, this paper is structured in the form of two consecutive short essays. In the first, we identify the character, features and purpose of the scholarly essay and examine its demise as an academic form. In the second, we explore some possible reasons why the essay never became fully accepted as an academic form in nursing. We suggest that the essay is thematically eclectic and stylistically promiscuous, drawing from a broad range of cultural, disciplinary and academic reference points. As such, it presents a challenge to the dominant technical rational approach to academic nursing in both its form and its content, particularly in its disregard for the rigidly imposed genres and structures increasingly demanded by academic nursing journals.

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Introduction

It might appear odd or even perverse to be arguing for the essay as a vehicle for academic thought and writing, particularly given the current emphasis on scientific research and evidence-based practice. In fact, the scholarly essay has virtually ceased to exist as an academic form in practice disciplines such as nursing, excluded by what we will identify and refer to below as the hegemony of the laboratory. In a practical as well as an intellectual attempt to reinstate it, this paper is structured in the form of two consecutive short essays. In the first, we identify the character, features and purpose of the scholarly essay and examine its demise as an academic form. In the second, we explore some possible reasons why the essay never became fully accepted as an academic form in nursing. We suggest that the essay is thematically eclectic and stylistically promiscuous, drawing from a broad range of cultural, disciplinary and academic reference points. As such, it presents a challenge to the dominant technical rational approach to academic nursing in both its form and its content, particularly in its disregard for the rigidly imposed genres and structures increasingly demanded by academic nursing journals.

The two essays presented subsequently differ somewhat in form, structure and intent. In the first, we employ references and citations from a range of published sources to argue that such citations are not always appropriate or relevant to the essay form. In the second, we follow the argument through by largely abandoning external points of reference. The first essay offers a semblance of balance and

objectivity in its argument against balance and objectivity, whilst the second is blatantly and unashamedly one-sided in its views. The first essay is structured according to the usual academic conventions of headings and sub-headings whereas the second is presented as a piece of continuous prose. The first is an appeal to rationality and to logic; the second to reason and to rhetoric.

First Attempt: The Essay as an Experiment in Thinking

If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial

Michel de Montaigne, 1580

The Essay Form

It is generally agreed that the essay form was conceived by the French writer Michel de Montaigne, who coined the term *essais* in the mid-sixteenth century from the French *essayer*, meaning to try, attempt or test. For Montaigne, to write an essay was to try out ideas or to test thoughts in relation to a particular topic. In its classic form, the essay is typically written in the first person singular and presents the opinions and subjective viewpoint of the writer (Miller, 2011). It is often an experiment with new ideas and is therefore a formative rather than an instructive enterprise. As Montaigne observed, 'I speak as one who questions and does not know ... I do not teach, I

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1792 295809.
E-mail address: g.rolfe@swan.ac.uk (G. Rolfe).

relate' (de Montaigne, 1958, 237). The essay is therefore not intended as a way of instructing others about what we already know, but rather as a *creative exercise* in order to discover for ourselves what we *think we might think* about a particular topic. Lukács (1978), writing in 1911, suggested that the essay is a literary form, midway between poetry and philosophy. The essayist deals with substantive issues in the manner of the philosopher but, like the poet, places great emphasis on the form and language in which those issues are addressed. Thus, for Lukács, the point in writing an essay lays 'not in the verdict ... but the process of judging' (18); not in the conclusion but in the thinking and the writing that leads to the conclusion. Similarly, Barthes (1970) considers the possibility that 'to write' can be employed as an intransitive verb, a verb with no object. It is less important what we write *about* than it is simply to write.

The essay as literary form has enjoyed a long and distinguished history, but partly due to a reduction in suitable publishing formats, it has fallen out of favour in recent years (Miller, 2011). The term 'essay' is now used mostly in an academic context, and essays are written predominantly by students rather than professional academics. As Bakewell (2011) observes:

Today, the word 'essay' falls with a dull thud. It reminds many people of the exercises imposed at school or college to test knowledge of the reading list: reworkings of other writers' arguments with a boring introduction and a facile conclusion stuck into each end like two forks into a corn-cob. (7–8).

In many disciplines, the student essay has become a mechanical exercise in which the student is required to write in the third person or the passive case, to stick to the facts, to avoid personal opinion and to support all assertions with up-to-date references from the academic literature. In a similar vein, Good (1988) considers the student essay to be restricted by the personalised and limited cache of knowledge of the individual writer, and therefore regards it as a 'preliminary form ... of use only until the student has acquired enough impersonal knowledge to write research papers and perhaps eventually scholarly articles, where the personal element is minimized' (4–5). In either case, there is general agreement that the essay form is suitable only for students and nascent academics and is of little consequence to the academy and those who work in it.

Clearly, the literary essay as conceived by Michel de Montaigne and the student essay as described by Good and Bakewell are two quite separate and distinct forms, and perhaps their only point of similarity is the term 'essay' itself. Whereas the student essay is a preliminary attempt or 'try' (essayer) at an academic piece of work, the literary essay is an experiment or 'trying out' of new ideas; whereas students typically write essays in order to demonstrate to the marker what they already know, the literary essay is an attempt to create new knowledge; and whereas the student presents the work of other writers, the personal essayist is predominantly writing her own thoughts and ideas. Regardless of these differences, neither the student essay nor the literary essay typically meets the standards usually required for publication in an academic journal.

The Academic Essay

However, between the literary essay and the student essay lays the third way of the academic essay. The academic essay is closer to the former than the latter: it usually takes the form of a personal first person account; it is passionate and frequently adversarial; and it is unashamedly partisan and one-sided. However, in common with the student essay, it often draws on the wider academic literature, although not in any systematic way and sometimes without explicitly citing its sources. Whereas most academic writing, including the student essay, employs 'an apparatus of citations and references which bind it into the "textuality" of its discipline' (Good, 1988, 6),

academic essayists traditionally draw on their own reading experience, often quote from memory, and expect their readers to be familiar with the citations. Thus: 'There are often quotations in the essay, but rarely footnotes' (Good, 1988, 6). However, with the recent exponential growth in published papers and research reports, such an expectation is no longer reasonable, and there is an increasing trend for citations in academic essays to be formally referenced. Nevertheless, there is little attempt at a systematic review or a comprehensive account of the literature. The academic essay 'does not begin with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to discuss; it says what is at issue and stops where it feels itself complete — not where nothing is left to say' (Adorno, 2000, 93). The purpose of citations and quotations is not to lend external authority to the essay: 'Thought acquires its depth from penetrating deeply into a matter, not from referring it back to something else' (Adorno, 2000, 99), and ultimately, 'an essay can become authoritative in academia partly because it does not cite authorities and speaks on its own authority' (Good, 1988, 178). When the work of other writers is quoted, as in this essay, it is usually as 'a way of bringing a new voice into the conversation, rather than providing authoritative support' (Good, 1988, 1). In Montaigne's words, 'I quote others only to make myself more explicit' (de Montaigne, 1958, 52).

The Essay as Experiment

The essay performs a number of important functions in and for the academy. Firstly, the essay makes knowledge claims in the same vein as, but distinct from, the scientific research paper. The essay differs from the research paper in form, method and content. Its form is discursive, lop-sided and unstructured: 'In the essay, concepts do not build a continuum of operations, thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet' (Adorno, 2000, 101). To a great extent, the form of the academic essay is determined by the method, or perhaps by the *lack* of method. In Adorno's words, the essay proceeds 'methodologically unmethodologically' (101), that is, its method is to follow the twists and turns of the train of thought that it is seeking to express. In fact, the method of the essay is best defined in terms of what it stands against, which is empiricism and the quest for certainty. In its place, the essay offers rhetoric 'which the scientific mentality, since Descartes and Bacon, has always wanted to do away with' (108). The method of rhetoric relies on persuasive argument rather than statement of empirical facts; it says 'try thinking about it in this way' rather than 'this is the way it is'. Whereas the scientific paper *presents* its conclusions, the essay engages the reader in a *discussion* and invites a response; whereas the scientific paper *reports* its method and findings, the essay *is* the method and findings. We might therefore argue that the essay fulfils the functions of both the research project *and* the research report. In this sense, the essay is no less experimental than the method of science; it is simply that the experimentation and the discovery occur in the act of writing itself. As Bense (1947) observes:

Thus the essay distinguishes itself from a scientific treatise. He writes essayistically who writes while experimenting, who turns his object this way and that, who questions it, feels it, tests it, thoroughly reflects on it, attacks it from different angles, and in his mind's eye collects what he sees, and puts into words what the object allows to be seen under the conditions established in the course of writing. (418).

The essay form is therefore a method for the more or less spontaneous creation of knowledge, although it is knowledge of a different kind from that produced by empirical research; it is *writing-as* research rather than merely *writing-up* research (Rolfe, 2009). The knowledge produced by essayistic writing does not form part of an organised whole, it cultivates diversity rather than unity, and it is

founded in the experience of the writer rather than in the scientific research project. Furthermore, it only *fully* becomes knowledge when the reader begins to interact with it. The essay is, in effect, one side of an open-ended discussion between writer and reader, and the scope and extent to which the essay generates knowledge is therefore largely dependent on the number and nature of its readers and their willingness to engage with and respond to the text. As Bakewell (2011, 9) says of Montaigne's *Essays*, it 'is much more than a book. It is a centuries-long conversation between Montaigne and all those who have got to know him'. As well as performing the dual function of simultaneously creating knowledge and reporting on it, the essay therefore also seeks to engage the reader as a literal or metaphorical co-writer.

The Essay as Critique

As well as a method for generating knowledge, the essay offers a vehicle for critique. Alter (2003) notes that the word 'essay' is also related to 'assay', to weigh up or analyse, and Adorno (2000) adds that the essay is 'the critical form *par excellence*' (106). However, its mode of critique is not the conservative 'university criticism' identified by Barthes (1987), which merely judges according to the agreed and accepted academic standards of the day. Rather, both the form and content of the essay implicitly undermine the unifying project of the academy by privileging the singular, the diverse and the personal. As Good (1988, 4) points out, 'the essay opposes doctrines and disciplines, the organising structures of academic knowledge – hence the essay's neglect in the higher levels of the academic literary system'. The essay transgresses subject boundaries, it blurs form and content, subject and object, theory and praxis, in ways that contravene many of the traditional rules and practices of 'good' university scholarship. The essay challenges what Barthes refers to as the *doxa*, the body of accepted academic opinion which 'goes without saying' (Barthes, 1987, 4), both in what it says and in the form which it adopts in order to say it. Essayistic critique might therefore be described as *radical* insofar as it attacks the very roots (*radix*) on which the academy is founded.

The essay offers a form (albeit a loose one) that encourages us not only to *write* differently, but to *think* differently; to think in an undisciplined way, that is, unfettered by the usual disciplinary constraints. Adorno (2000, 106) emphasises this important connection between thinking and writing in his claim that 'The essay is the form of the critical category of our mind'. The essay is therefore a written expression, perhaps *the* written expression, of radical thought, and as such it provides a public forum for dissent that is not constrained by the forms and structures that it is arguing against. Adorno appears to be suggesting that all radical critique tends towards the essay form, and perhaps even that the essay form is essential for the formulation and expression of critique. If this is indeed the case, then any discipline that rejects the essay as unscholarly or even as anti-academic is also excluding the possibility of a fundamental radical critique of that discipline.

The Essay as Resistance

Barthes would no doubt have argued that this is precisely the point; that the rejection of the essay as an academic form is an attempt to restrict challenges to the *doxa*, to reinforce existing disciplinary structures and boundaries and thereby to maintain ownership and control over the generation and dissemination of disciplinary knowledge. It is perhaps worth remembering that the academic use of the terms 'doctrine' and 'discipline' originate in the Latin *doctor* (teacher) and *discipulus* (student or disciple). A challenge to the academic system of doctrines and disciplines is therefore a direct challenge to the ethos of leaders and disciples and hence to the hierarchical structure of the ownership and dissemination of knowledge. We would therefore argue that

there is far more at stake than merely the reinstatement of what might be seen by some as a somewhat archaic academic form. We believe that it is no coincidence that the demise (or perhaps the suppression) of the academic essay has been accompanied by a subsequent rise in the academy of corporatism, managerialism and performance indicators. To those of us who stand opposed to these trends, the essay matters.

Second Attempt: Against Rigour

Be a good craftsman; avoid any rigid set of procedures ... Stand for the primacy of the individual scholar; stand opposed to the ascendancy of research teams of technicians

C. Wright Mills, 1959

Some disciplines are more accommodating and accepting of the essay form than others. Philosophy and the humanities have always recognised and respected the academic essay and continue to do so. Other disciplines such as psychology have a long tradition of essay writing, dating in this case back to William James and Sigmund Freud, but have more recently given greater recognition to scientific research reports. Nursing, which came relatively late to the academy, saw a rapid turn during the nineteen-nineties towards research papers as the gold standard for academic publishing, and has reached a position today where many nursing journals contain little else other than empirical research reports. This privileging of the research paper was initiated in the UK by the introduction of evidence-based practice from the discipline of medicine, along with the growing demand on nurse academics to compete in the newly-introduced Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) (now rebranded as the Research Excellence Framework). Taken together, these factors signalled the demise of scholarly writing as a major contributor to nursing knowledge and the rise of the research report as the primary source of evidence for practice and the major prerequisite for an entry to the RAE.

Whilst these are perfectly valid reasons why many nurse academics continue to feel compelled to write and publish research reports rather than academic essays, there are other more insidious factors that militate against the production and publication of non-empirical scholarly work. On the one hand, the 'publish or perish' culture in higher education has led to the creation of more journals and academic books than at any previous time. On the other hand, however, this rapid growth in publications has served to increase competition in a shrinking market caused by the global recession and draconian spending cuts in higher education. University libraries are reducing the number of journals that they stock to those with the highest 'impact factors', and students are cutting back on the books they purchase to the bare minimum of recommended texts. As a consequence, journal editors are being encouraged to publish papers that will be widely cited by other writers – usually research papers and systematic literature reviews – in order to improve their impact factors, and commissioning editors of books are focussing primarily on undergraduate teaching texts in order to ensure maximum sales. It is therefore becoming increasingly difficult to find a journal editor willing to give space to an academic essay or a commissioning editor prepared to publish a scholarly monograph or a text that has been written for academics rather than students.

In addition to this economic incentive to publish research reports at the expense of scholarly essays, there is an even more intractable problem of what we might call *the hegemony of the laboratory*. The rise to prominence of empirical research as the gold standard method for generating nursing knowledge has introduced into the practice of academic writing a number of research-related concepts and criteria

such as rigour, control and detachment. Scientific research, and particularly experimental research, depends for its credibility on the researcher rigorously following the method laid out in the research protocol, on exercising strict control over the independent variables, and on taking a detached and objective stance so as not to exert extraneous influence in the form of researcher bias over the collection of data. Whilst such qualities are all commendable in the scientific researcher and add to the validity and reliability of the research study, these and other imperatives of the research laboratory have somehow become confused and conflated with the values of good scholarship. This unfortunate confusion is not limited to the discipline of nursing, but it does appear to be particularly virulent here, perhaps as a result of nursing being a young and particularly naive discipline and many nurse academics having little experience of wider academic discourses.

In order to illustrate this problem, let us begin with one of the aforementioned examples. The credibility of scientific research findings depends to a large extent on the researcher rigidly adhering to the research protocol and the principles of her chosen methodology. Any deviation from the prescribed method, such as not following the sampling frame or the inconsistent administration of a questionnaire, will call into question the accuracy, reliability and validity of the findings. A rigorous, consistent and inflexible approach is therefore essential, and is rightly considered as one of the founding principles of scientific research. However, the criterion of rigour, that is, of rigidly and unswervingly adhering to rules and protocols, has somehow made the transition from the laboratory to the academy; from a criterion for making judgements about the conduct and value of scientific research to a criterion for judging academic writing. Whilst there might be some merit in writing up research projects in a rigorous, rule-bound and formulaic fashion, creative and critical academic essays require the very opposite qualities of flexibility, unpredictability and, in some cases, the wilful and deliberate flouting of the rules governing form, structure and content.

Unfortunately, however, a growing number of nursing journals, including some of those regarded as the most prestigious, now impose strict 'guidelines' and headings for *all* submissions. For example, one well-respected and highly rated journal demands that all 'discussion papers' include detailed information about the systematic methodology employed to search the literature databases and another, whilst prepared to accept 'discursive papers', imposes on them the somewhat rigid structure of *Aims; Background; Method; and Relevance to Clinical Practice*. These demands by academic journals and their editors for form and content to follow predetermined and rigorous criteria stem from the methodology of scientific research, and whilst such criteria might well impose a logical order and structure to the paper, it is difficult to see how they facilitate creative thought or enhance academic quality. Many of the best essays show little inclination towards specific and predetermined aims and methods, and whilst they may well have relevance to clinical practice, it is often deliberately left to the readers to draw their own conclusions. Furthermore, these criteria, if applied across the board, would effectively exclude the publication of essays and other scholarly contributions to the discipline, including this paper. Since academic journals are the medium through which most academic debate and discussion is conducted, it is somewhat worrying that the discourse of nursing is being regulated more and more not only by a handful of journal editors, but by journal publishers according to the dictates of the market.

The imposition of the values of science and the ethos of the laboratory across the entire scope of academic nursing has had a number of other less apparent but equally detrimental effects on all aspects of the published output of the discipline. As well as determining the content and structure of the papers published in academic journals, laboratory values have also exerted a broader influence on the style and form of those papers. We have already suggested that the hegemony of the laboratory has served to restrict the publication of papers

that discuss and report on personal and idiosyncratic observations and opinions in favour of generalisable knowledge, and this emphasis on generalisability can be seen as part of a wider privileging of scientific research findings over the experiential knowledge of individual practitioners. Furthermore, since the function of the research report is primarily to convey information in a single direction from writer to reader, reports are usually written in the third person (the researcher administered the questionnaire) or the passive case (the questionnaire was administered) in order to emphasise the universal and the impersonal nature of the study; that is, to give the impression that the same findings would be produced regardless of the personal and demographic characteristics of the researcher and/or the research 'subjects' (who, despite their title, are often regarded more as research 'objects'). Whilst most nursing journals now accept papers written in the first person, the wider implications of the personal perspective, such as the adoption of a particular critical position or the presentation of a one-sided thesis, are generally considered unacademic.

A further assumption of the technical rational ethos of the laboratory is that the communication and translation of knowledge is transparent and unproblematic, and that the readers are passive recipients who 'take on board' more or less uncritically the message that was transmitted by the researcher and seamlessly incorporate it into their practice. Where a discussion section is included in a research report, it is controlled and managed by the writer, who provides a summary of the main points of the study along with some of its 'limitations', before arriving at a definitive conclusion accompanied by recommendations for practice. This dialectic form is not confined to empirical research reports, and writers of so-called 'discussion papers' are usually also required to conform to the classical 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' model of balanced discussion. As with research papers, the discussion is managed by the writer, who is expected to present a full and comprehensive summary of both sides of the argument (thesis and antithesis) before arriving at a synthesis which takes each side into account in order to arrive at a reasoned and rational conclusion. Many journal editors and reviewers are therefore likely to reject the partial and one-sided essayistic papers that are written precisely to draw readers and other writers into the debate by deliberately leaving gaps in the discussion and implicitly or explicitly inviting challenges and responses to a subjective and biased account.

We have argued, then, that the values and criteria of the laboratory have replaced the traditional methods and methodologies of the academy, even outside of the laboratory-based 'hard science' disciplines. Put another way, the mission of the University has shifted from the production and dissemination of *ideas* to the generation of *facts*, resulting in a subsequent shift in published outputs from discursive forms such as the essay and the position paper to denotative forms such as the research report and the systematic literature review. This shift from ideas to facts is far more significant than might be imagined. An academic discipline dedicated to the generation and dissemination of ideas encourages diversity of thought and the opening of up a variety of competing perspectives from a wide range of conflicting discourses. In contrast, the pursuit of facts through scientific research entails the gradual elimination of opposing theories and hypotheses in what Karl Popper referred to as a form of Darwinist natural selection, until only the single 'fittest' hypothesis remains.

The literary theorist and critic Bill Readings has attributed this striving towards a universally applicable methodology which is guaranteed to produce the 'right answer' to any given problem as resulting from an etymological confusion about what the University is for; in particular, to a mistaken belief that the University should be concerned with *unity* and *universality*. In the case of practice disciplines such as nursing, this misunderstanding has resulted in a technical rational approach to practice (that is, to regarding nursing practice as a technology) which imposes a single, context-free and universally applicable solution to any given family of clinical problems. The essay, both as an alternative source of knowledge for practice and as a

radical critique of the basic assumptions on which the academic discipline of nursing rests, resists and opposes this hegemonic trend towards universal certainty. In the place of unity it offers diversity, contradiction and discussion; in the place of universality it offers unique responses to unique situations involving unique individuals. To paraphrase Jacques Derrida, what we would like to say, finally, is that there must never be a final word.

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