On the essay in a time of GenAI

Thomas Corbin, Jack Walton, Peter Banister & Jean-Philippe Deranty

Published online: 16 Oct 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 955

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

On the essay in a time of GenAI

Thomas Corbin[a] [ID], Jack Walton[a] [ID], Peter Banister[b] [ID] and
Jean-Philippe Deranty[c] [ID]

[a]Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (CRADLE), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia; [b]Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Logroño, Spain; [c]Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

The essay is facing a legitimacy crisis. With students increasingly able to generate plausible submissions using Generative AI, the essay's status as a valid instrument of assessment of student learning is under serious threat. Yet, rather than abandoning the essay or turning to superficial fixes, this paper argues that the current disruption offers a chance to reconsider what essays are for as well as the chance to consider what they could be. In this paper, we distinguish between the standardised academic essay of today from the historically contextualised essay. Drawing from the history of ideas, we argue that essays are best understood not as products to be measured against static criteria, but exploratory engagements with thought, shaped by uncertainty, divergence, and the recursive relationship between writer and text. This understanding has long been at odds with how essays are typically assessed and it is this misalignment, not AI alone, that we suggest underpins the current crisis. In response, we propose a set of structural changes to essay assessment design. We propose a holistic approach to assessment which, we suggest, helps show how the essay can be reconfigured as both an educationally meaningful and valid assessment task, fit for an age of AI without being defined by it.

There is good reason to think that the essay as an assessment tool in education is in crisis. Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools now allow students to produce texts that mimic conventional essays, enabling students to submit high-quality pieces of writing without engaging meaningfully in the thinking which those essays are meant to reflect. As a result, GenAI makes it difficult, seemingly impossible even, to treat submitted essays as valid assessments of learning which demonstrate genuine understanding, skill, or ability on the part of the student (Dawson et al., 2024). This validation challenge has led many institutions and educators to consider abandoning essays entirely in favour of alternative assessment methods that appear less vulnerable to AI disruption (Klaas, 2025).

This situation presents educators with a difficult choice. If the essay can no longer be treated as a valid demonstration of student learning, should it be abandoned in favour of assessment formats less vulnerable to AI? Or, are there changes we could

---

CONTACT Thomas Corbin ✉ t.corbin@deakin.edu.au ▣ Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning (CRADLE), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia.

make to how essays are conceived and assessed that might restore their legitimacy? These are not decisions to be made lightly. Each option carries significant pedagogical and institutional consequences, and the changes we implement now may prove difficult to reverse.

As Corbin, Bearman, et al. (2025) have recently argued, assessment in a time of AI exemplifies the characteristics of a 'wicked problem', a problem defined not by correct solutions but by imperfect trade-offs. This frame helps make clear why establishing the essay's educational value is a necessary first step. Only once we understand what is at stake can we ask what forms of change might be justified. We pursue this need by way of two guiding questions:

> RQ1: What unique educational value does the essay offer?

> RQ2: Are there structural changes to the essay as assessment that can preserve this value while maintaining its status as a valid form of assessment in the age of GenAI?

We address these two questions in turn, by dealing first with the question of value and second with the question of validity. In section one of this paper, drawing on the history of the essay, we argue that what we term the essay, properly understood within this historical and pedagogical context as an exploratory form of thinking rather than a static product, offers irreplaceable educational benefits. Specifically, we attempt to show that such essays develop three crucial intellectual capacities that no other assessment format can cultivate as effectively: the ability to think productively within uncertainty, self-regulated learning through the recursive relationship between writer and text, and what Heidegger calls 'meditative thinking' as opposed to merely calculative approaches to knowledge.

Having established this educational value, in section two we then turn to the practical challenge of assessing essays validly in the context of GenAI. We argue that traditional approaches to essay assessment, which treat essays as standardized products to be evaluated against predetermined criteria, are fundamentally incompatible with the essay's exploratory nature and render them vulnerable to AI simulation. Instead, we propose that a holistic approach to assessment allows a more authentic recognition of the essay's process-oriented and divergent character. These approach, we argue, may help restore validity to essay assessment while preserving the essay's distinctive educational contributions.

Section 1: Understanding the essay

If AI can produce texts that satisfy our evaluation criteria, then it seems obvious that the essay can no longer serve as a reliable measure of student learning. This is particularly clear when we consider the essay in today's educational landscape, which is, in Andrew's (2003) words, an 'elaborate game' involving a structured demonstration of knowledge with clear thesis statements, systematic arguments, and definitive conclusions. This is precisely the kind of writing that GenAI can now produce with ease, text that is well structured, coherent, and superficially persuasive. If such texts can be generated and submitted as assessment items without the student possessing the relevant knowledge or competency, which we know they can, then their use as evidence for assuring student learning outcomes becomes problematic.

However, this conception of the essay bears little resemblance to what essays historically were and how they functioned. The standardized texts we now call essays more closely resemble research reports or academic articles, genres designed to present findings rather than explore ideas. This fundamental misalignment between the historical essay and contemporary practice lies at the heart of our current dilemma. By misunderstanding what essays truly are, we have created assessment structures vulnerable to AI disruption while simultaneously losing sight of the essay's unique and irreplaceable educational value.

A quick note on scope before we turn to the essay's historical origins. While the essay has a long pedagogical history across both secondary and tertiary contexts, our discussion here is situated primarily within higher education, where our own expertise lies. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the dynamics we describe are relevant wherever essays are used as instruments of assessment.

The essay as intellectual process

The word 'essay' derives from the French verb 'essayer', which means to try, to attempt, to test (Heilker, 1993). This etymology hints towards the essay's original purpose. It was not to demonstrate mastery over a topic, but to engage in intellectual exploration, more a research method than a research output. For example, when Michel de Montaigne published his *Essais* in 1580, he presented them not as polished presentations of knowledge but as attempts to weigh and engage with ideas. Montaigne's essays were characterized by their meandering, reflective quality, their willingness to entertain contradictions, and their resistance to definitive conclusions. He writes, 'I do not portray being', Montaigne wrote, 'I portray passing' (Montaigne, 1958, p. 611). This conception of essay creation as a process of becoming rather than a declaration of being, or alternatively as thinking-in-progress rather than finished thought, stands in stark contrast to the static, thesis-driven texts commonly understood as essays today.

We are not the first to point out the historic split between the essay traditionally conceived and as assessed in modern education institutions (Chadbourne, 1983; Lennon, 2008; Wittman & Kindley, 2022). As Jones (2017, p. 116) puts it, 'the essay was not always like this'. The distinction between the essay and more systematic forms of writing was recognized long before our current educational practices emerged. Joseph Addison, writing in 1712, distinguished between texts 'written with regularity and method' and those 'that run out into the wildness of those compositions which go by the name of Essays'. The former required having 'the whole scheme of the discourse in my mind before I set pen to paper', while for essays, 'it is sufficient that I have several thoughts on a subject, without troubling myself to range them in such an order, that they may seem to grow out of one another' (Addison, 1712/1965, p. 355). This distinction captures a fundamental difference in approach: systematic writing begins with conclusions and works backward to support them, while essayistic writing allows understanding to emerge through the process itself.

This exploratory tradition was not unique to Western Europe. Similar forms existed across cultures, from Chinese *xiaopinwen* (minor works) to Japanese *zuihitsu* (following the brush). What united these diverse traditions was not a fixed structure but what Claire de Obaldia (1995, p. 2) calls 'the essayistic spirit', an approach to writing that

values experimentation, reflection, and the development of thought through writing. As Francis Bacon noted regarding the 'essay' in 1612, 'the word is late, but the thing is ancient' (2000, p. 341). In its current iteration, the essay assessment has seen this ancient art of intellectual exploration left behind, transforming into its opposite: a rigid exercise in proving what we already claim to know.

The essay's substance

To fully grasp the essay's irreplaceable role in education, we must also understand the philosophical substance beyond its historical context. Theodor Adorno's 'The Essay as Form' provides perhaps the most penetrating analysis of the essay's distinctive intellectual character. For Adorno, the essay is not simply a literary genre but a mode of thought that stands in opposition to the totalizing tendencies of systematic philosophy and positivist science. The essay, he argues, 'thinks in fragments' and 'catches fire on the object' while refusing the illusion of completeness or finality that characterizes systematic thought (Adorno et al., 1984, p. 158).

What makes Adorno's analysis particularly relevant to our educational context is his understanding of how the essay's form embodies a specific epistemological stance. The essay, in its resistance to identity thinking, the reduction of objects to pre-existing categories of understanding, creates a space for what Adorno calls 'intellectual experience'. This is not merely subjective impression but a mode of engagement where thought 'does not advance in a single direction' but allows 'aspects of the argument [to] interweave as in a carpet' (Adorno et al., 1984, p. 160). The essay's refusal to subsume particulars under universal categories creates a dialectical relationship between subject and object, thinker and thought, that allows new insights to emerge. In simpler terms, the essay allows writers to discover their thoughts through writing rather than simply presenting thoughts they've already formed. It's the difference between using writing to explore a question ('What do I make of this?') and using it to defend a predetermined answer ('Here's my thesis and three reasons why').

This capacity for discovering thought through writing represents something education cannot afford to lose. When students engage in essayistic writing, they practice a form of thought that resists both dogmatic certainty and relativistic scepticism. The essay, as Adorno understands it, does not require students to provide answers but creates the conditions for their questions to emerge. It does not require them to resolve contradictions but allows them to work through them productively. This dialectical quality makes the essay uniquely valuable for developing what Hannah Arendt called 'enlarged thought', the ability to consider issues from multiple perspectives and to engage in genuine dialogue with diverse viewpoints (Arendt, 1982, p. 43). Georg Lukács, whose early work 'Soul and Form' heavily influenced Adorno, offers a similar perspective. For Lukács, essays mediate between subjective experience and broader social or philosophical questions, enabling what he called 'situated, limited standpoints from which we can perceive something fleeting and meaningful about life itself' (Lukács, 1910/1974, p. 10). This ability to connect personal understanding with larger questions makes the essay particularly valuable for developing critical consciousness. It teaches students not just to master facts but to situate knowledge within broader

contexts and to recognize their own relationship to what they know and the world around them.

The educational value of the essay

What makes the essay valuable, likely irreplaceable in higher education is not its philosophical pedigree but its unique capacity to develop intellectual abilities that cannot be cultivated as effectively through other means. These abilities, however, are precisely those indicated by this pedigree. The essay, understood as a process rather than a product, fosters cognitive capacities that are essential for advanced learning but difficult to develop through other educational methods.

First, the essay cultivates the capacity for what philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) called 'thinking at the border'. That is, the ability to work at the edges of established knowledge where certainty gives way to exploration. When students write essays, they practice navigating intellectual terrain where answers are not yet fixed, where multiple perspectives must be held in productive tension. This capacity to work through ambiguity without premature closure is essential for advanced intellectual work in any discipline.

Some might object that research reports and journal articles also operate at knowledge boundaries, but there is a crucial distinction. Research reports present the results of completed inquiry; they document a journey that has already reached its destination with uncertainties resolved and contradictions tidied away. The essay, by contrast, invites both writer and reader into the journey itself, into the process of working through questions rather than presenting answers. What makes this irreplaceable is that it develops a fundamentally different intellectual capacity: not the ability to present findings coherently (as research reports do) but the ability to think productively within uncertainty itself.

The research report privileges clarity by excluding the messy process of discovery; it presents knowledge as settled even when describing new discoveries. The essay, as Montaigne practiced it, privileges the process over the product, the questions over the answers. When students write research reports, they practice organizing knowledge they already possess; when they write essays understood in their historical context, they practice developing understanding they did not previously have. This distinction is not merely theoretical but reflects fundamentally different cognitive processes. The former reinforces existing knowledge structures; the latter creates new ones. No assessment format that privileges clarity and coherence over exploration can develop this capacity as effectively as the essay.

Second, the essay develops what cognitive psychologists call 'self-regulated learning', the ability to monitor and direct one's own learning processes (van der Graaf et al., 2022). The essay requires students not just to display knowledge but to actively shape it through writing (on this point see also: Menary, 2007). As Montaigne himself noted, 'I have no more made my book than my book has made me' (Montaigne, 1958, p. 504). This reciprocal relationship between writer and text makes the essay a uniquely powerful tool for developing metacognitive awareness. Students must not only communicate ideas but reflect on how those ideas develop and change through the writing process itself.

While other academic assignments, such as reflective journals, learning portfolios, or even research papers, may incorporate elements of self-reflection, none creates the same conditions for metacognitive development as the essay. The crucial distinction lies in the essay's integration of content exploration and self-awareness. In reflective journals, students typically reflect on learning that has already occurred elsewhere; the reflection is separated from the primary intellectual work. In research papers, students may develop metacognitive skills incidentally, but the form itself does not require or foreground this development. The structure prioritizes content mastery over epistemological awareness.

The historically contextualised essay, by contrast, makes the relationship between knower and known its central subject; thinking and thinking-about-thinking are inseparable. When Montaigne writes about cannibals, death, or thumbs, he is simultaneously exploring both the subject matter and his own process of understanding it. This integration cannot be replicated through forms that separate content from reflection or that privilege systematic presentation over exploratory thinking. The essay's unique value lies precisely this fusion, the way it requires students to engage simultaneously with subject matter and with their own developing understanding (Badley, 2020). This integration develops a type of metacognitive awareness that is qualitatively different from what other assessment forms can achieve, because it emerges through the process of exploration rather than being added as a separate reflective component.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the essay fosters what philosopher Martin Heidegger (1966) called 'meditative thinking' as opposed to 'calculative thinking'. Calculative thinking focuses on efficiency and utility. It seeks to categorize, predict, and control. Meditative thinking, by contrast, remains open to what is not yet known; it dwells with questions rather than rushing to answers. The genuine essay, with its exploratory character and resistance to premature closure, provides students with perhaps their only regular opportunity to practice this increasingly rare but essential mode of thought.

This distinction may seem abstract, but it has profound educational implications. Nearly every other assessment format in contemporary higher education (from multiple-choice exams to research papers, and from case studies to laboratory reports) operates within the logic of calculative thinking. Each requires students to work efficiently toward predetermined outcomes, to organize information according to established patterns, and to demonstrate mastery of defined content. Even creative assignments typically establish parameters for successful completion and evaluate students on their ability to meet these criteria effectively. The essay, on the other hand, creates conditions for what Heidegger (1966) calls 'releasement toward things', an openness to letting meaning emerge rather than imposing predetermined categories. This is not merely a stylistic difference but reflects a fundamentally different relationship to knowledge itself. In the modern university's emphasis on measurable outcomes and demonstrable skills, meditative thinking finds few sanctioned spaces. The cost is significant. When we ask students to write five-paragraph essays, research papers, or even creative pieces with predefined evaluation criteria, we teach them that thinking's purpose is to arrive efficiently at answers rather than to engage meaningfully with questions.

This matters because meditative thinking develops intellectual capacities that calculative thinking cannot reach: the ability to recognize the limitations of current frameworks, to question fundamental assumptions, and to remain open to radical reconceptualization. These capacities are essential not just for academic innovation but for navigating the complex ethical and social challenges that graduates will face. Few if any other assessment format can develop these capacities as effectively because other formats are structurally committed to calculative thinking, to measuring how well students can work within existing frameworks rather than transform them. The essay alone, properly understood and practiced, creates educational space for thinking that transcends utility and reaches toward wisdom.

These capacities, including thinking at the border, self-regulated learning, and meditative thinking, cannot be effectively developed through the standardized assessment formats that dominate contemporary education. Five-paragraph essays, research papers, and similar forms privilege clarity over complexity, assertion over exploration. They teach students to begin with conclusions and work backward to support them, rather than allowing understanding to emerge through the writing process. In doing so, they not only fail to develop higher-order thinking but produce exactly the kind of predictable, formulaic writing that AI can easily replicate. This approach may effectively measure knowledge acquisition, but it fails to develop the higher-order thinking skills that distinguish true higher education from mere content delivery.

The essay's irreplaceability becomes particularly evident when we consider its historical role in the development of new knowledge. In the 1650s, Robert Boyle and the Hartlib Circle turned to essays specifically because they provided 'a loose, open-ended, and collaborative form' ideal for 'the aggregative, piecemeal mode of discovery they advocated' (Werlin, 2022, p. 103). For Boyle, the essay's unsystematic character was not a flaw but a virtue. Unlike comprehensive systems that obliged writers 'to take upon him to teach others what himself does not understand', essays allowed for partial, tentative engagement with complex ideas. The essay served not to demonstrate existing knowledge but to develop new understanding through the process of writing itself.

This capacity for knowledge creation rather than mere knowledge display makes the essay uniquely valuable in higher education. While other assessment forms can effectively measure what students already know, the essay understood along the above lines develops their capacity to generate new understanding. This distinction becomes crucial as we consider the challenges posed by generative AI. Artificial intelligence may excel at simulating the structured, thesis-driven texts that characterize contemporary assessment practices, but it cannot replicate the essay's function as a technology for developing human thought.

The question facing higher education is not whether we can preserve essays in the age of AI, but whether we can afford not to reclaim this crucial space for human intellectual development. Of course, as Womack (1993, p. 42) writes, essays are not 'only a question of grades'. The essay, understood as a process rather than a product, offers something no AI can replicate: not just a demonstration of knowledge but the cultivation of wisdom. However, grades cannot be simply forgotten about or ignored.

This irreplaceable educational value demands that we find new ways to incorporate essays into our assessment practices. This is a challenge we will address in the next section.

2. Reimagining essay assessment

Under conventional arrangements, essays are standardised, product-focused, and evaluated against pre-specified criteria. These features not only make them simulable by GenAI but also misrepresent the essay's original epistemic function. As argued above, the essay in that context is one which is both exploratory and processual. Treating it as a closed, convergent product undermines both its educational value and its validity as a form of assessment. Although this is true at all times, it is particularly salient in a time of GenAI.

Students are already using AI in ways that cut across the core practices of higher education. We have mounting evidence that students use AI to support their reading (Corbin et al., 2024), to generate and interpret feedback (Henderson et al., 2025), and, most disruptively for our purposes, to understand, produce, reference, critique, and polish assessment tasks (Walton et al., 2025). These uses are not uniformly good or bad, they can save time, scaffold understanding, or undermine the very work assessment is meant to evidence, but together they mean that essays as we understand them, alongside many other established assessment practices, cannot be assumed to transparently reflect student learning. As a result of this, teachers, are struggling to navigate this terrain. As increasing evidence shows, staff are uncertain about when and how student use of AI crosses into unacceptable territory and what this means for how they assess their students (Corbin, Dawson, et al., 2025; Farazouli et al., 2025).

The only apparently concrete implication of this uncertain landscape is that change seems unavoidable if the essay is to function as a valid assessment of learning. That is, either the essay is abandoned altogether or, alternatively, it is reshaped so that it can continue to function in an AI-saturated learning environment. But what kind of change is needed? One option might appear to be simply to prohibit students from using AI. This kind of change has the obvious appeal of allowing current assessment practices to remain intact with only slight changes, for example to the assessment instructions to ensure students are aware that AI is not allowed. Yet as Corbin et al. (2025) argue, such 'discursive' changes (including the popular 'traffic light' or 'AI use declaration' approaches) do little to address the conditions that make AI simulation viable. Without changing the mechanics of the assessment itself, students remain free to simply ignore the prohibition (Gonsalves, 2025).

What remains is the harder but more promising path of 'structural change' (Corbin et al., 2025), in which the task itself is reconfigured. In the context of the essay as assessment task, we must explore if the task can be reconfigured in ways that allow our students to reap the benefits of the essay but at the same time do not entail a return to pre-AI task completion conditions. Consequently, we must answer the question: does the fact we cannot simply 'ban' students from using AI tools mean we must similarly ban teachers from using essays as instruments of assessment? To answer that question, we must ask if there are structural design changes which can preserve

the essay's distinctive educational value while restoring its legitimacy in the presence of AI systems.

It is likely that we will not know precisely what kinds of structural changes will succeed (if, indeed, any will) to support the essay as a valid assessment of learning until we have empirical evidence of them working in practice. However, we will not reach those practices until we have something to guide us towards them. It therefore seems important to rest on relevant assessment literature to guide us towards these practices, examining what is known about valid assessment practices and consider how these insights might be applied to the case of the essay in order to suggest the kinds of structural changes that should be pursued. This is what we will attempt in the remainder of this section, starting with the literature on divergent assessment.

The essay understood in the sense outlined in section one of this paper, is what Sadler (2009) describes as a *divergent* task: it invites responses that differ substantially in form, structure, and perspective. Such assessments aim to recognise a diversity of accomplishment, rather than achieving homogenised consensus (Jorre De St Jorre et al., 2021) Standardised rubrics, designed for consistency, are poorly suited to such variation, insofar as divergent tasks 'invite responses from students which do not (and should not) look exactly alike' (Walton & Martin, 2025, p. 155). The standard practice of predetermining criteria for prospective purposes (Sadler, 2005) is a poor fit for such tasks, a) because it risks promoting a 'compliance' mentality amongst students (Bell et al., 2013; Torrance, 2007), and b) because predetermined statements cannot predict which criteria will actually prove to be of relevance to each individual work, each of which will invite a different mix of criteria owing to their divergence (Sadler, 2009, 2014, 2015). The result is a fundamental mismatch between what is asked of students, and what is rewarded.

To assess such work fairly and appropriately, we require approaches that accommodate divergence without collapsing into impressionism. Holistic approaches to assessment (in the sense of Sadler, 2009, 2014; Walton & Martin, 2025) are well suited to this. Rather than orienting to a list of fixed criteria in advance of assessment, holistic approaches prioritise global evaluative impressions of quality, informed by disciplinary expertise, which are justified through reference to features of the work that warrant attention (Sadler, 2010; Walton & Martin, 2025). This reversal is structurally significant: it centres expert interpretation over checklist application, making it possible to recognise quality in its full complexity. It is authentic to the essay, where value often emerges from internal coherence, rhetorical movement, or conceptual depth that may not map neatly onto pre-written rubrics.

Holistic assessment does not imply arbitrariness. As Sadler (2005, 2015) argues, even where criteria are determined in advance of assessment, decisions about what counts toward achievement invariably rests with the subjective interpretation of discipline experts. In holistic models, validity and reliability are achieved through inter-subjective calibration: educators working together to interpret authentic student work, compare judgments, and articulate the reasoning behind their decisions (Sadler, 2013). Rather than demanding universal agreement, this process builds shared standards grounded in actual evaluative encounters. Tai et al. (2018) describe this as the

cultivation of evaluative expertise: the ability to reason about quality in context, not simply apply abstract rules. In the case of the essay, such expertise is crucial precisely because its most valuable features resist simple codification.

Still, holistic judgment alone is insufficient, insofar as it addresses only one side of the equation. For the potential of this approach to be realised, it must be embedded in pedagogical structures that support processual ways of working, exposure to ambiguity, and opportunities for students to cultivate their own judgment (Walton et al., 2025). This includes designing tasks and teaching strategies that help students themselves become evaluators. For instance, through engagement with exemplars, students can encounter a range of valid essay forms and begin to discern what makes them effective. When students are asked to generate criteria in response to exemplar texts, compare judgments with peers, and refine their reasoning through dialogue with educators, they develop deeper insight into the nature of quality. Over time, this cultivates the capacity to write evaluatively—not merely to meet standards, but to enact thoughtful judgment within the constraints of a task. The objective is to frame assessment as a space of reciprocal meaning-making, where evaluative knowledge is co-constructed. When applied to essay tasks, these frameworks support the recovery of essayism: they treat writing as the unfolding of understanding rather than a performance for compliance.

This structural reconfiguration also has implications for feedback. As Corbin et al. (2025) argue, recognitive feedback depends on seeing the student not just as a candidate for evaluation but as a developing thinker. In essay-based tasks structured around exploration and process, such feedback becomes not only possible but necessary. The teacher is not merely confirming correctness but engaging in dialogue about how thought is shaped and expressed. These feedback encounters - grounded in judgment, not procedure - help sustain the very capacities the essay is meant to foster; that of intellectual risk, perspective-taking, and epistemic self-awareness.

In this way, the challenge of preserving the essay becomes inseparable from the challenge of restoring judgment to educational assessment. Structural change in this case is not about technical fixes, but about recovering a more ambitious vision of what assessment can do. If the essay is to be more than a genre—it must be part of a system that treats learning as emergent, writing as thinking, and assessment as a site of interpretation and recognition. This demands time, institutional support, and epistemic courage. It requires that educators re-engage with the interpretive dimensions of their work and resist the pressure to reduce evaluation to procedural correctness.

We do not claim that holistic assessment, or any single strategy, is sufficient. Rather, we offer this approach as one possible thread in a larger fabric of structural redesign. Holistic assessment, when embedded within such a reconfigured assessment ecology, becomes one of several mechanisms that can support the essay's survival. It is not a panacea, but a structural tool - a way to reorient judgment toward complexity, process, and context. It cannot secure validity alone. But when paired with thoughtful task design, process visibility, and dialogic engagement, it helps reposition the essay as something GenAI cannot easily replicate: not merely a text, but a trace of thinking, an encounter with ideas, and a space for becoming.

Conclusion

The emergence of GenAI has presented a clear challenge to the essay's role as an assessment tool in higher education. By enabling the effortless production of polished texts, GenAI exposes a longstanding vulnerability: the overreliance on the essay as a final product to measure student knowledge and engagement. However, the solution is not to abandon the essay but to rethink how it is used and assessed. The essay's true value lies in its processual nature, its capacity to foster critical thinking and intellectual exploration, and its role as a unique space for engaging with complex ideas without a precise destination pre-ordained. At our present point in history, it is hard to resist pointing out that assessment tasks which hold the capacity to help students develop these skills should not be abandoned lightly.

Throughout this paper, we have argued that the essay is and ought to be understood as far more than an artifact, it is an *attempt* to grapple with ideas, as Michel de Montaigne first envisioned. It thrives on ambiguity and dialectical engagement, and it mediates between personal and universal thought. These qualities make the essay an irreplaceable tool for learning, particularly in disciplines that prioritize exploration and critical inquiry. Yet, traditional assessment practices, which focus solely on the artifact, fail to capture these strengths and, ultimately, leave the essay vulnerable to the disruptions posed by GenAI.

To respond meaningfully to this challenge, we must implement meaningful structural changes to assessment practices that align with the essay's divergent, processual nature rather than constrain it. This paper has proposed moving beyond rigid, pre-specified criteria toward approaches that allow for flexible judgments rooted in professional expertise and shared evaluative calibration. Holistic assessment has been presented as a potential approach in this vein- not as a definitive answer but as one option worth exploring alongside more conventional responses to the AI challenge. By designing tasks that invite distinctive responses and embedding students in sustained dialogue about exemplars and standards, we can assess essays in ways that honour their educational value without sacrificing fairness or rigour. In doing so, we make it possible not only to preserve the essay in a time of GenAI, but to revitalise it as a cornerstone of inclusive, thoughtful, and genuinely higher learning.

Disclosure statement

ORCID

Thomas Corbin http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8750-5711
Jack Walton http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9885-8448
Peter Banister http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7216-3912
Jean-Philippe Deranty http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3860-4371

References

Addison, J. (1965). The Spectator, No. 476, Friday, September 5, 1712. In D. F. Bond (Ed.), *The Spectator* (Vol. 4, pp. 354–356). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1712).

Adorno, T. W., Hullot-Kentor, B., & Will, F. (1984). The essay as form. *New German Critique*, *32*(32), 151–171. Original work published 1958). https://doi.org/10.2307/488160

Arendt, H. (1982). *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy*. (R. Beiner, Ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Bacon, F. (2000). *The essays or counsels civil and moral*. (B. Vickers, Ed.) Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1612).

Badley, G. F. (2020). Essays, essayists, and essayism: A slow critique. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *26*(7), 806–816. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419830126

Bell, A., Mladenovic, R., & Price, M. (2013). Students' perceptions of the usefulness of marking guides, grade descriptors and annotated exemplars. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *38*(7), 769–788. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2012.714738

Chadbourne, R. M. (1983). A puzzling literary genre: Comparative views of the essay. *Comparative Literature Studies*, *20*(2), 133–153.

Corbin, T., Liang, Y., Bearman, M., Fawns, T., Flenady, G., Formosa, P., McKnight, L., Reynolds, J., & Walton, J. (2024). Reading at university in the time of GenAI. *Learning Letters*, *3*, 35. https://doi.org/10.59453/ll.v3.35

Corbin, T., Bearman, M., Boud, D., & Dawson, P. (2025). The wicked problem of AI and assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2025.2553340

Corbin, T., Dawson, P., Nicola-Richmond, K., & Partridge, H. (2025). 'Where's the line? It's an absurd line': Towards a framework for acceptable uses of AI in assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *50*(5), 705–717. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2025.2456207

Corbin, T., Dawson, P., & Liu, D. (2025). Talk is cheap: Why structural assessment changes are needed for a time of GenAI. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2025.2503964

Corbin, T., Tai, J., & Flenady, G. (2025). Understanding the place and value of GenAI feedback: A recognition-based framework. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *50*(5), 718–731. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2025.2459641

Dawson, P., Bearman, M., Dollinger, M., & Boud, D. (2024). Validity matters more than cheating. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *49*(7), 1005–1016. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2024.2386662

de Obaldia, C. (1995). *The essayistic spirit: Literature, modern criticism, and the essay*. Clarendon Press.

Farazouli, A., Cerrato Pargman, T., Bolander Laksov, K., & McGrath, C. (2025). Navigating uncertainty: University teachers' experiences and perceptions of generative artificial intelligence in teaching and learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2025.2550766

Gonsalves, C. (2025). Addressing student non-compliance in AI use declarations: Implications for academic integrity and assessment in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *50*(4), 592–606. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2024.2415654

Heidegger, M. (1966). *Discourse on thinking* (J. M. Anderson & E. H. Freund, Trans.). Harper & Row. (Original work published 1959).

Heilker, P. (1993). Writing process and the writing of essays. *Issues in Writing*, *6*(1), 51.

Henderson, M., Bearman, M., Chung, J., Fawns, T., Buckingham Shum, S., Matthews, K. E., & de Mello Heredia, J. (2025). Comparing generative AI and teacher feedback: Student perceptions of usefulness and trustworthiness. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2025.2502582

Jorre De St Jorre, T., Boud, D., & Johnson, E. D. (2021). Assessment for distinctiveness: Recognising diversity of accomplishments. *Studies in Higher Education*, *46*(7), 1371–1382. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1689385

Jones, A. (2017). A history of the history essay: Heritages, habits and hindrances. *History Australia*, *14*(1), 115–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2017.1286708

Klaas, B. (2025). The death of the student essay—and the future of cognition. *The Garden of Forking Paths*, June 19, 2025. https://www.forkingpaths.co/p/the-death-of-the-student-essayand

Lennon, B. (2008). The essay, in theory. *Diacritics*, *38*(3), 71–92. https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.0.0062

Lukács, G. (1974). *Soul and form* (A. Bostock, Trans.). MIT Press. (Original work published 1910).

Lukács, G. (2017). On the nature and form of the essay. In *Essays on the essay film* (pp. 21–40). Columbia University Press.

Menary, R. (2007). Writing as thinking. *Language Sciences*, *29*(5), 621–632. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2007.01.005

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Northwestern University Press. (Original work published 1964).

Montaigne, M. D. (1958). *The complete essays of Montaigne* (D. M. Frame, Trans.). Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1580–1588).

Sadler, D. R. (2005). Interpretations of criteria-based assessment and grading in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *30*(2), 175–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/0260293042000264262

Sadler, D. R. (2009). Indeterminacy in the use of preset criteria for assessment and grading. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *34*(2), 159–179. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930801956059

Sadler, D. R. (2010). Fidelity as a precondition for integrity in grading academic achievement. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *35*(6), 727–743. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930902977756

Sadler, D. R. (2013). Assuring academic achievement standards: From moderation to calibration. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, *20*(1), 5–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2012.714742

Sadler, D. R. (2014). The futility of attempting to codify academic achievement standards. *Higher Education*, *67*(3), 273–288. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9649-1

Sadler, D. R. (2015). Backwards assessment explanations: Implications for teaching and assessment practice. In D. Lebler, G. Carey, & S. D. Harrison (Eds.), *Assessment in music education: From policy to practice* (Vol. 16, pp. 9–19). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-10274-0_2

Tai, J., Ajjawi, R., Boud, D., Dawson, P., & Panadero, E. (2018). Developing evaluative judgement: Enabling students to make decisions about the quality of work. *Higher Education*, *76*(3), 467–481. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0220-3

Torrance, H. (2007). Assessment as learning? How the use of explicit learning objectives, assessment criteria and feedback in post-secondary education and training can come to dominate learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, *14*(3), 281–294. https://doi.org/10.1080/09695940701591867

van der Graaf, J., Lim, L., Fan, Y., Kilgour, J., Moore, J., Gašević, D., Bannert, M., & Molenaar, I. (2022). The dynamics between self-regulated learning and learning outcomes: An exploratory approach and implications. *Metacognition and Learning*, *17*(3), 745–771. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11409-022-09308-9

Walton, J., & Martin, J. L. (2025). Applying Sadler's principles in holistic assessment design: A retrospective account. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *30*(1), 154–171. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2023.2244439

Werlin, J. (2022). Experimental Science and the Essay. In K. Wittman & E. Kindley (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to The Essay* (pp. 97–110). Cambridge, University Press.

Walton, J., Bearman, M., Crawford, N., Tai, J., & Boud, D. (2025). How university students work on assessment tasks with generative artificial intelligence: Matters of judgement. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*.

Wittman, K., & Kindley, E. (Eds.) (2022). *The Cambridge companion to the essay*. Cambridge University Press.

Womack, P. (1993). What are essays for? *English in Education*, *27*(2), 42–49. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-8845.1993.tb01101.x