

Contracting cheating: the place of the essay in the age of the essay mill

It took just five minutes to commission an essay. No matter that I had chosen two obscure authors and a topic abstruse enough to fox a specialist. And no matter that since April 2022, under the Skills and Post-16 Education Act, it has been illegal in England to ‘provide, arrange, or advertise’ for financial gain any services that promise bespoke assignments for those students unmotivated, desperate, or lazy enough to pay to cheat.¹ My 2000-word essay, written by what the site describes as a ‘platinum writer’ (the priciest of four options), would be ready in fourteen days, was purportedly guaranteed to be a 2:1 standard, and would cost £23.85. That comically precise fee would include checks against plagiarism software to help me dodge the few practical tools that universities have in their arsenal against the umpteen websites determined to profit from contract cheating.²

Contract cheating and the ‘essay mills’ that enable it are one of the favoured topics of those few education stories sensational enough to earn the attentions of today’s media.³ The boom in companies touting for ghost-writing business in part results from the success of

¹ See the new clause added before Clause 25, ‘Chapter A1: Cheating Services Provided for Post-16 Students at English Institutions’: <https://perma.cc/22MN-5A3M>. The act does not use the collocation ‘contract cheating’, which dates to a 2006 paper by R. Clarke and T. Lancaster (‘Eliminating the successor to plagiarism? Identifying the usage of contract cheating sites’, *Proceedings of 2nd International Plagiarism Conference* (JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service, Newcastle)). Rather it refers to ‘a service of completing all or part of an assignment on behalf of a student where the assignment completed in that way could not reasonably be considered to have been completed personally by the student’.

² The definition of ‘contract cheating’ provided by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education reads as follows: “‘Contract cheating’ happens when a third party completes work for a student who then submits it to an education provider as their own, where such input is not permitted. It is distinct from collusion, as the student contracts the third party to provide the assessment, usually a company or individual using a website to promote themselves and receive orders. Such companies have become known as ‘essay mills’, even though they supply more than just essays. The common approach is for the work to be outsourced once again by the mills to individual writers’ (QAA, *Contracting to Cheat in Higher Education: how to address contract cheating, the use of third-party services and essay mills*, October 2017).

³ For recent examples from newspapers at differing ends of the political spectrum, see: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6986675/Almost-one-seven-graduates-admits-theyd-paid-essays-Cheating-Inc.html>; <https://www.ft.com/content/ffc1c843-40c2-4fdf-b6f5-c118b363ad90>; and <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/apr/26/essay-mills-offering-incentives-to-cheating-university-students-experts-warn>.

technological tools used to discourage plagiarism: once software such as Turnitin became mainstream in universities, pilfering sections of an essay from the infinite resources of the internet became a riskier endeavour.⁴ The pandemic, which moved teaching and assessment online, only heightened the appeal of paying for an assignment composed to your specifications by a hidden hack; demoralised undergraduates found themselves targeted by pop-up adverts that whispered sympathetically of the especially challenging conditions that students were facing and waved a supposedly fool-proof solution in front of them.⁵ Of course, cheating is nothing new. I've seen it firsthand: twenty years ago, a fellow finalist who was himself known to pass on his weekly essays to others not for any fee but *gratis* was hoiked out of Exam Schools after an invigilator spotted some strips of paper tucked into his sleeve: the miniaturised essay plans were a sign of true desperation and surely more ingenious for their origami skills than they were intellectually helpful. Such instances of cheating, however, are amateur by today's standards.

Research by one of the keenest analysts of contract cheating, Thomas Lancaster, has identified a substantial increase in the numbers of companies whose services are listed when 'write essays' is typed into a search engine (a rise of 118% between June 2016 and October 2018, for example).⁶ Some of these companies are based in the UK but many more operate from abroad, exploiting high unemployment rates among graduates in Pakistan, Nigeria,

⁴ David Kernohan, 'A brief history of plagiarism and technology', published on 20/03/2019 at <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/a-history-of-plagiarism-and-technology/>.

⁵ 'To help you fight these tough conditions caused by the Coronavirus outbreak, we have reduced the price of our services by up to 50 percent—grab the offer now!'. Reported by the MP Chris Skidmore in his Private Members' Bill moved on 10th February 2021 ([https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-02-10/debates/5E37B30F-EFD9-40A2-AA28-5D05327A7596/EssayMills\(Prohibition\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-02-10/debates/5E37B30F-EFD9-40A2-AA28-5D05327A7596/EssayMills(Prohibition))). See also A. Reedy, D. Pfizner, L. Rook, L. Ellis, 'Responding to the COVID-19 emergency: student and academic staff perceptions of academic integrity in the transition to online exams at three Australian universities', *International Journal of Educational Integrity*, 17:9 (2021), 1–32.

⁶ T. Lancaster, 'Commercial contract cheating provision through micro-outsourcing web sites', *International Journal of Educational Integrity*, 16: 4 (2020), 1-14 (9).

Kenya, and India, who earn beggarly fees for their work, which is then sold on to students in affluent, anglophone countries at an inflated rate, with the agent or outsourcer pocketing the profit. As competition grows, essay mills are thinking up new tactics to boost their business, including buy-one-get-one-free offers, social-media marketing, and outsourced, on-the-ground leafleting in university halls and student unions.⁷ There are even now price-comparison websites to help you get the best deal for your lack of academic integrity. Will you go for the sober-sounding UKEssays, the playful Peachy Essay, or the avian call of Edubirdie?

My flippant words belie a worrying trend. If essay mills are the most newsworthy examples of cheating in higher education, newspaper articles have for some time been reporting eye-catching increases in academic misconduct cases more broadly, including that longstanding bugbear, plagiarism.⁸ This might well be a case of finding what we are looking for as universities have tightened their procedures for formally investigating practices that are then categorized, in a scale from serious to extremely serious, as poor academic practice, academic malpractice, plagiarism, or contract cheating. A common response from the accused, when I have sat on quasi-judicial panels, has been to plead ignorance of standards of academic research and writing. Such an explanation might, at a push, excuse less egregious examples of inadvertent plagiarism. After all, as esteemed a writer as Petrarch observes in his *Letters on Familiar Matters* how easy it is, in the alchemical processes of reading and writing, to misremember a quotation, absorb it into one's own stock of thoughts. But the accidents of influence, or, in modern terms, a shaky grasp of plagiarism guidelines, can do little to defend the concerted act of soliciting an essay, paying out for it, and presenting it as

⁷ Lancaster, 'Commercial contract cheating provision'.

⁸ See, for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/apr/29/cheating-at-top-uk-universities-soars-by-30-per-cent>. The article corrects the headline statistic of 30% to 40%.

your work. When students do offer defences, they lean on temporary or chronic ill fortune. This is where university regulations on ‘extenuating circumstances’ come in: allowed examples are serious illness, physical or mental, undiagnosed/unmitigated disability, bereavement, caring duties, and trauma. The student must, where possible, back up the claim with concrete evidence.

Sitting on Extenuating Circumstances Committees is a chastening experience. For every student trying their luck with a shaggy-dog story (my dog didn’t eat my homework but it did spill water on my laptop), there are young people facing unimaginable domestic situations, recovering from violent incidents, or suffering from debilitating medical conditions. When allowances are made for such extenuating circumstances, the outcome of investigations into academic misconduct is often a quiet warning, a capped mark, or a formal censure, expulsion being reserved, in practice, only for repeated offenders of the most flagrant breaches of trust. The occasional case should not, moreover, misrepresent a student body that is by and large, at least in my experience, meticulously wary of committing an accidental act of plagiarism, to the point of over rather than under-referencing.⁹ Still, the pious disapproval that characterizes responses on Student Room message boards to posts such as ‘Do essay mills work?’ cannot stifle an economic truth: if the number of providers of commissioned essays is growing, it can only be because the demand is there.¹⁰

⁹ My experience, then, runs contrary to the image of the lazy and incompetent student peddled by certain newspapers. On this popular image of the feckless student, see R. Brooks *et al.*, ‘Threats and objects of criticism’, in *Constructing the Higher Education Student: Perspectives from across Europe* (Policy Press: Bristol, 2022), pp. 133-154 (p. 134-139). See also K. Finn, N. Ingram, and K. Allen, ‘Student millennials/millennial students: how the lens of generation constructs understandings of the contemporary HE student’, in R. Brooks and S. O’Shea (eds), *Reimagining the Higher Education Student* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp 188–205.

¹⁰ One study estimates that globally 15.7% of students purchase ‘contract cheating solutions’ during what the author calls their ‘academic journey’. See P. Newton, ‘How common is commercial contract cheating in higher education and is it increasing?’, *Frontiers of Education* (2018), 3:67.

What, if anything, can we do to halt the growth in contract cheating? The fanfares that announced the legislation criminalizing essay mills in England (and England alone, note) disguise loopholes in the law that allow contract-cheating businesses to cheat their way out of accusations. Websites claim they are doing no more than providing ‘model answers’ for students to be inspired by and disclaimers pop up when you begin an order, asking you to promise that you aren’t registered at an English institution and won’t be passing the commissioned work off as your own. Technological solutions include detection software, which can’t do much for on-demand writing, and the blunter option of universities blocking servers so that illegal essay mills can’t be reached from campus. The businesses, though, are wise to this and change their names and proxy locations regularly to avoid detection.

What if we address the will rather than the practice? A very different approach is the empathetic/ethical one, which focuses on educating students to appreciate the importance of academic integrity. The laudably optimistic idea here is that if we offer students greater support as they make the transition from school to higher education then they will feel more strongly that they are part of a community and will share, and heed, the values of that community. It is not enough to wave a document at freshers that speaks sternly of academic misconduct: what is needed is an extended, accumulative introduction to the values and practices of academia, effected by means of ‘practical experiences holistically addressed in a supportive learning environment’.¹¹ (Were I marking this last sentence, I would ask ‘which means what? examples?’) The problem is that such an introduction is feasible in a foundation or ‘enabling programme’, which is where Australian researchers tested out their hypothesis,

¹¹ A. Fudge, T. Ulpen, S. Bilic, *et al.*, ‘Does an educative approach work? A reflective case study of how two Australian higher education Enabling Programs support students and staff [to] uphold a responsible culture of academic integrity’, *International Journal of Educational Integrity*, 18:5 (2022), 1-20.

but a first year at university with an induction spread over months rather than the few days of freshers' week would require extensive reworking of most degree programmes.

We are left with the very object of the crime: the assessment itself. The most promising reflections to date on tackling contract cheating suggest that the best way to stymie essay mills is to change how we assess students. Such invitations to rethink assessment build on a body of work in Education Studies that has called in question 'traditional' modes, such as the timed examination, both for pedagogical reasons (exams reward rote learning) and for concerns over that buzzword 'wellbeing' (students find exams intolerably stressful).¹² UK universities have responded with aplomb to the challenge: assessments in the Faculty of Arts where I work now include podcasts, video presentations, curated digital-exhibitions, and recorded court trials. What has not been rethought, either in academic research calling for new forms of assessment or in the much-vaunted 'innovative' assessments that result, is the very product that the essay mills churn out: the essay itself.

Not rethought recently, at least. Some thirty years ago, in 'What are essays for?', Peter Womack sought to make colleagues look anew at this most hackneyed of academic exercises, calling attention, in his unpacking of a form so familiar as to be invisible, to the significant role of the diverse kinds of writing that inform the final product: the writing, say, that makes up note-taking, planning, summarizing, the annotations of close reading, the deletions of drafting, and the additions and edits of revising.¹³ For today's undergraduates,

¹² See, for example, the work of the TESTA project ('Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment': <https://www.testa.ac.uk/>), the journal *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy, and Practice*, and M. Richardson, *Rebuilding Public Confidence in Educational Assessment* (London: UCL Press, 2022).

¹³ P. Womack, 'What Are Essays For?', *English In Education* 27:2 (June 1993), 42-49 (42): 'The essay is, so to speak, the default genre for student writing. [...] everyone returns, as if by a homing instinct, to setting, writing and marking essays. [...] In this way, other forms of writing in response to reading get defined as preparatory – as things we devise to help novices get into the subject, until such time as they're ready for the real thing. The apparent inevitability of this progression makes the form look natural, as if intellectual activity produces the essay the way a tree produces branches.'

raised in GCSE and A-level regimes of PEEL (point, evidence, explanation, link), writing an essay is an exercise in toeing the line of a rigid, conventionally four-part, model. These students, who begin every module with their eyes fixed on the assessments, struggle to believe that the roots of the essay, which for them is the ultimate schoolroom exercise, lie in concerted *opposition* to pedagogical practice.¹⁴ It is news to them that the essay, which emerged from the experimental philology of Italian 15th-century humanists and the sprawling, backtracking writing of the inventor of the very term ‘essai’, Michel de Montaigne, has the potential to be not a dry, tick-box exercise, what Kathryn Murphy and Thomas Karshan have characterized as a ‘strenuous weighing up’, a ‘sober examination’, but an enlightening adventure in thought and expression, a piece of writing that is strong in voice and intent but at the same time knowingly ‘tentative’, ‘preliminary’, ‘provisional’, and the stronger for being so.¹⁵

Might one way of undermining the appeal of essay mills, then, be to rescue the essay from its calcified pedagogical format and inform and enthuse our students about the history and variety of both the essay and *essay-ing* as a mode of thought? This would mean turning to the past to reflect on our present, something that theories of pedagogy in higher-education journals don’t do enough of. And it might not be a comfortable experience for our undergraduates (or indeed ourselves) as it involves challenging shibboleths and removing conventional crutches to thought and writing. But it can, if done well, be revelatory, for both students and lecturers. I know, because I have tried it, in a module on the very figure who is heralded as the originator of the essay, Montaigne. My students, once their initial

¹⁴ Kathryn Murphy and Thomas Karshan make this point neatly in ‘On the Difficulty of Introducing a Work of this Kind’, their introduction to *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 2-30 (pp. 3-16 especially).

¹⁵ Murphy and Karshan, ‘On the Difficulty’, p. 14. Brian Dillon, in his performative exploration of the essay as form and action, *Essayism* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020), writes of the need to cultivate ‘an attitude to the form – to its spirit of adventure and its unfinished nature’ (p. 20).

discombobulation passed, achieved great things intellectually, found and enhanced their (very different) voices, and – unthinkable – took *pleasure* in the process of essay writing. Baffled queries ahead of the assessment (‘You mean I can use the ‘I’ in an essay?’) gave way to experimental prose that combined incisive, informed analysis with direct addresses to Montaigne himself, essays that foregrounded revisions and so gave insight into the thinking behind the arguments, writing that was free of the usual fillers (‘It is necessary now to...’), that rubbished the convention of never using personal pronouns, and that found less rigid and pedestrian ways to shape an argument, assert a viewpoint, and – vitally – win round its reader.

My experiment in recasting the essay as a creative, idiosyncratic form of writing was part of a ‘research-led’ module for finalists. But confronting students with the multitudes that the taken-for-granted essay contains need not be reserved for such specialist options. The Study Skills units that freshers must complete in their first few weeks at university are worthy but require little thought (and, according to the laments of my tutees, provide little distraction). Our teaching on our degree programmes frequently seeks to undo, and not just extend, the subject knowledge that students gain at A-level (I am thinking here of the case of grammar, or of some philosophy colleagues who prefer students to arrive at their BA in Philosophy *without* a philosophy A-level). Why not extend this undoing of assumptions to our students’ understanding of the essay? Let’s prompt them from the start of their studies to think and write enjoyably and creatively, to use the capacious potential of the essay form to develop distinctive – and inimitable – voices. By so doing we could take a small but potentially decisive step in quieting the fraudulent everyman voice and formulaic essay-structure on which contract cheating and essay mills rely.

Works Cited

NB I include below only books, book chapters, journal articles, or conference proceedings. Links to blogs and policy papers cited in the essay can be found in the relevant footnote.

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