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INTRODUCING NEW TYPES OF ASSESSMENT WITHIN THE DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY: THE EXPERIENCE IN A HISTORY MODULE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX



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Summary

This paper discusses changes to methods of assessment introduced during the academic year 2007-08 into a History module (Fascist Movements and Regimes in the Twentieth Century) at the University of Essex. It explains the reasoning behind the changes, which introduced more varied types of writing assignments, and outlines the ways in which students engaged with them. After reviewing the student feedback, the paper concludes that new forms of assessment were positive for the student learning process. But the extent to which History students are wedded to one type of writing (the traditional essay) means that many lacked the confidence and skills to carry them out effectively.

History Assessment in Higher Education

It has become increasingly recognised in Higher Education that assessment is not only a method of grading students but a vital part of the learning process.¹ The manner in which students direct their energies is directly related to how they believe they will be assessed. Biggs describes this as 'backwash': for many students, assessment is what their course is about, rather than the increased knowledge and methods of understanding that the tutor has in mind.²

Given that most students enter Higher Education after experiencing a secondary education system that values 'facts' and encourages 'answers' that students believe are expected of them by examiners, this is perhaps inevitable.³ A report on history teaching in schools prepared by Ofsted in July 2007 notes an over-concentration on events and personalities at the expense of developing an understanding of chronology and relationships between the different topics studied. School students, it notes, are unable to understand the 'big questions' and are unable to draw conclusions about the wider significance of what they have studied. The biggest criticism by inspectors was 'the predominance of direct input by teachers, with pupils having little to do beyond sitting and listening'. Too often, 'pupils are not given enough opportunity to ask questions, identify evidence and work out the story for themselves'.⁴

The implications for assessment at HE level are important. Poorly conceived assignments run the risk of reinforcing approaches to learning prevalent at secondary/FE level. Considerable thought needs to be given, therefore, to designing assignments that encourage 'deeper learning approaches', by evaluating not only students' 'knowledge' and 'comprehension' but also their ability 'to apply', 'to analyse', 'to synthesise' and 'to evaluate' (to use Bloom's taxonomy).⁵ Such considerations have prompted disciplines to introduce innovations in the nature of both formative and summative assessments. Portfolios, reflective diaries, problem-solving tasks,

¹ The literature has been well summarised by John Biggs and, with particular reference to History, by Alan Booth. J. Biggs, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does* (second edition), Open University Press, Berkshire, 2003, pp. 140-69; A. Booth, *Teaching History at University: Enhancing Learning and Understanding*, Routledge, London, 2003, pp. 128-48.

² Biggs, *Teaching*, p. 140.

³ An article by Barbara Hibbert, an experienced A-level history teacher, highlights how teaching practices and the 'needs of examinations' is leading to 'many students finding the transition [into Higher Education] difficult'. B. Hibbert, "'It's a lot harder than politics": Students' Experience of History at Advanced Level', *Teaching History*, 109, 2002, pp. 39-43.

⁴ Ofsted, 'History in the Balance', July 2007 Available at:

http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/assets/Internet_Content/Shared_Content/Files/2007/july/hstryintheblnc.pdf

⁵ A good summary of Bloom's taxonomy and its relevance to the teaching of history is: James P. Johnson, 'Integrating Educational Theory and History', *The History Teacher*, Vol. 10, No. 3, (May, 1977), pp. 425-433. Available online at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/491852>

more oral tests and practical examinations, web-based assessments (particularly multiple choice answers) and the introduction of peer-assessment are increasingly used, alongside more traditional essay-style coursework and examinations. Generally speaking, however, history has been rather resistant to such changes.⁶ Although methods of assessment have become more diverse, it remains the case that the academic essay retains a 'commanding position' in assessment by university History departments.⁷

The ubiquity of the essay within history reflects strongly held views by historians about the nature of their discipline. 'Doing History' is fundamentally about problem solving; in short, about how and why events and processes occurred in the past. The word 'essay' has its linguistic roots in the Latin word meaning 'to test' or 'to weigh out'. It is, without doubt, a form of writing ideally suited to testing, weighing up or trying out interpretations and arguments – in other words, problem solving of the past. A difficulty arises, however, if the essay is seen as the only way for students to write about history.

The changes introduced to the module on Fascism at the University of Essex (open to second- and third-year students) represented an experiment to move away from the traditional essay as the main form of assessment in coursework. While essay-type questions were retained in the final exam (50 per cent of the final mark), coursework assignments (the other 50 per cent of the module mark) aimed to give students experience in more varied types of writing. They also introduced a more explicit element of reflection.

The rationale behind the changes can be divided into three. The first point relates to the challenge of converting 'surface learners' into 'deeper learners'. To write a good traditional essay involves focussed research, understanding and summarising interpretations, evaluating evidence, critical reasoning, structuring an argument and good command of language. It allows for 'student individuality and expression' and can 'reflect the depth of student learning'.⁸ In short, it calls for excellent intellectual and practical skills. But, as Dai Hounsell has noted, the tasks posed by a history essay can also be easily adapted by surface learners: students often approach essay writing as a task of searching for and organising factual information relating to

⁶ This conclusion seems borne out by Vanessa Chamber's report commissioned by the HEA Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology: 'The teaching and assessment of Contemporary History in UK higher education institutions, HEA, 2008. Available at:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hca/documents/reports/history/DP_Contemporary_History.pdf

⁷ Dai Hounsell, 'Reappraising and recasting the history essay', in Alan Booth & Paul Hyland (eds.) *The Practice of University History Teaching*, Manchester University Press, 2000 (181-93), p. 181.

⁸ Phil Race, 'The Art of Assessing', *New Academic*, 1995, vol 5, no 3. Available at: http://www.city.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/assessment/artof_fr.html

the general topic posed by the question in a 'non-interpretive' way.⁹ This is clearly the approach adopted by large numbers of students who continue to tackle essay writing in the way in which they have been encouraged to do at secondary level. Setting essays as coursework assignments does not necessarily challenge surface learners to reflect about issues and to study in a deeper fashion. It can even reinforce lazy approaches to studying and learning. On the other hand, posing a variety of tasks can generate 'deeper learning', discourage routine thinking and encourage students to employ a wider range of practical and theoretical skills. The overall transferable skill-set of students is enhanced, as is their eventual employability.

Secondly, more variety in assessment is likely to allow a wider layer of students more fully to achieve their potential. It permits students to perform across a wider range of the 'intelligences' outlined by Howard Gardner.¹⁰ For example, the students likely to shine in essay writing are those possessing 'linguistic intelligence'. The same student might, however, perform less confidently when asked to analyse data from company accounts or a census return. But such tasks – which are essential within economic, demographic and social history – are well suited to students possessing logical-mathematical intelligences.

Also pertinent here is the significant number of students diagnosed as having Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD), most usually some form of dyslexia. Many such students are amongst the hardest working and contribute the most in seminars and discussions. The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) outlines the symptoms of Dyslexia as including 'difficulty with sequences, e.g. getting dates in order', 'poor organisation', difficulty in organising thoughts clearly' and 'erratic spelling'. A firm grasp of chronology and structure, as well as accurate writing, are, of course, core aspects of a good history essay. Dyslexic students have, inevitably, particular problems with this type of assessment. The BDA also outlines a number of 'compensating' qualities often possessed by dyslexic people. These include 'innovative thinking', 'trouble-shooting', 'problem solving', 'creativity' and 'lateral thinking'.¹¹ A wider range of assessment practices can give students with SLDs greater opportunities to develop and to demonstrate their full potential.

The third reason relates to the need to design forms of assessment that deter plagiarism. Jude Carroll has outlined how students with surface approaches to learning begin tackling an assignment by asking themselves: 'where can I find the answer?' and 'has someone done this

⁹ Hounsell, 'Reappraising', pp. 186-87.

¹⁰ For a summary of Howard Gardner's ideas on multiple intelligence, see:

http://www.newhorizons.org/future/Creating_the_Future/crfut_gardner.html

¹¹ British Dyslexia Association, 'What is Dyslexia', at: <http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/whatisdyslexia.html>

already?’¹² To test this argument, I introduced an exercise at an ‘essay writing workshop’ organised for first-year history undergraduates. Two volunteer students were sat down in front of a computer screen attached to seminar room’s visual display. After relaxing them, I asked them to demonstrate to the class how they researched an essay. The first thing they did was to type the essay question into *Google*. They then explained that the results of the search would provide them with the basis to find relevant literature to read and ideas to write about. The students selected were hard-working and intelligent students. Yet, their approach was instructive. It prompted me to put myself in the position of a student and experiment with a number of essay questions myself.

I chose a history module at Essex at random – ‘Clash of the Superpowers: History of the Cold War’. I selected the first essay title for the assignment due at the end of the autumn term with the title: ‘Why did the war-time alliance break down?’ I typed it into *Google* and promptly received 134,000 hits. The first page of hits included:

- A PowerPoint presentation on ‘why did the war-time alliance break down?’ with a basic outline of an essay to answer the question
- Revision notes for A-level students discussing the question
- An analysis of an essay on ‘Why did the war-time alliance break down?’ by the Language Learning Department at Monash University, Australia
- Two articles on Wikipedia
- An article on the topic from a website called: ‘American History for Australian schools’

In short, Google had provided enough material on this and the subsequent two pages to write an ‘answer’ to the question. I would probably have to check one or two books mentioned to ensure that my references were accurate. Although I would not be troubled to draw on skills relating to analysis, synthesis or evaluation, I could probably satisfy the requirements of the assignment.

¹² See Jude Carroll and Jon Appleton, ‘Plagiarism: A Good Practice Guide’, JISC, Oxford Books University, 2001. Available at: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/uploaded_documents/brookes.pdf

There were two other hits on the first page of the Google search, however, that raised even more cause for alarm. These were listed as:

Essay: Why Did The Wartime Alliance Break Down?

Why Did The Wartime Alliance Break Down? By the end of the Second World War, there were three main victors, Britain, The United States Of America and the ...
www.coursework.info/.../Other_Historical_Periods/Why_Did_The_Wartime_Alliance_Break_Down_L817606.html

Essay: Why did wartime alliance turned into Cold War?

Get Free Coursework: **Why did wartime alliance** turned into Cold War? ... causes into three parts: the long term reasons for the breakdown of the relations, ...
www.coursework.info/.../Why_did_wartime_alliance_turned_into_Col_L63991.html

The listings were links to essays on the website www.coursework.info. Here, the student finds the first 150 words of an essay on their topic. To receive the full version, they are asked to register for a monthly £4.99 or an 'economy annual subscription of £37.50'. Students prepared to offer the site at least three essays of their own work can earn five days 'free access' for each document supplied.¹³ Further exploration of the site finds essays suitable for a range of assignments set in history courses at the University of Essex (and elsewhere). I searched for an essay that I had set in the first-year survey course in modern history: 'Why were there two Revolutions in Russia during 1917'. There were eight essays with the same basic title available on the site. For a non-coping student faced with looming deadlines and lured by promises that essays will be 'plagiarism guaranteed', £4.99 a month might appear a tempting offer. The important point is, however, that students are effectively being led to the site by the essay questions set by university history tutors.

¹³ See http://www.coursework.info/cgi-bin/community/community.cgi?do=user_signup

More Varied Types of Writing

Details of the assessment introduced in the module on Fascism can be found in the appendix. Students were required to complete three pieces of course work. For the first two assignments, they could choose from a list of 15 tasks. The third assignment required students to act as seminar leaders and to write a reflection on the experience. The questions on the list and the ways in which students approached them will be discussed first.

The 15 assignment-tasks raised a number of skills for students not usually posed by traditional essay questions. These can be summarised as follows:

1. Writing for different types of audiences

Two assignments (1 and 12) asked students to write a report for a TV producer but also involved relating history to a popular audience. Reports were also required for a newspaper's legal department (6) and for a government department (7). Articles were requested for a journal aimed at A-level students (3), readers of *History Today* (4) and *The London Review of Books* (11). Students would be expected to consider their audience and, possibly, to research the publication or similar publications in order to ensure the form of their piece was suitable and the register of the writing at the right level.

2. Reflection

A number of assignments explicitly asked students to explain the process of their research and the choices they made in finalising their proposals or recommendations. This was the case in assignment 1 (the proposal for a TV series). It was also the case in assignment 2 (of which more below) and assignment 3, which asked students to explain how they had researched and constructed the article aimed at A-level students. The aim was to encourage students to reflect on the approach they were using throughout the research and writing process.

3. Imaginative writing

Imagination is an essential element of much history writing. Yet asking students to produce a steady stream of traditional essays does little to encourage it and has, as Booth notes, a detrimental effect 'on motivation and risk taking'.¹⁴ Two assignments (2 and 12) specifically called for imaginative writing. For assignment 2, students were asked to imagine that they were living in 1900. They had to research the influence of ideas of certain individuals at that particular time and to write an appraisal of them for the *English Historical Review*, a contemporary journal. This was a challenging assignment as it involved researching what relevant people had written

¹⁴ Booth, *Teaching History*, p. 133.

before 1900 and not after that date. It also required knowledge of the particular political and social concerns of the time and meant consciously avoiding assumptions based on later knowledge of events. Assignment 12 also involved imagination but in a different way. It required students to research but also to imagine events on 6 February 1934 (the date of a riot inspired by extreme-right and fascist organisations in Paris during which around 15 people were killed and one thousand injured) and relate them to a plot for the science-fiction TV series, *Dr Who*.

4. Application of history to contemporary debates

Assignments 7 and 6 both raise scenarios which are entirely plausible. In Assignment 7, students are asked to write a briefing paper about fascist movements in Hungary or Romania, both of which in the recent period have re-entered the popular memory. Assignment 6, asks students to engage with the political debate about the British National Party (BNP) and relate it to the academic literature on the nature of fascism.

5. Focused research

Some assignments were rather close to traditional essay questions in the form of writing required and assignment 9 was a commentary, a skill that history students are usually taught in the first year. But completing these assignments involved focused research – rather than the generalised hunt for facts and information that students (as illustrated by the experiment in the study skills workshop) often embark on when writing essays. Assignment 4, for example, could be rephrased as ‘Was Nazi Germany fascist, totalitarian or a unique phenomenon?’ A Google search for this title comes up with 125,000 hits – with plenty of material on the first few Google pages for a ready-made answer. Assignment 4, however, instructs students to discuss the arguments of specific historians and political scientists. It requires skills of research, summarising and evaluation – and would be impossible to complete well by simply relying general material in textbooks or on the internet. Assignment 10 asked students to summarise and evaluate a debate between two historians over the character of the Vichy regime in wartime France and calls for a similar approach. Assignment 13 asked for a comparison between fascism and authoritarianism in two different countries. The issue raised by Assignment 5 was phrased the previous year as ‘Discuss the race policy of fascist Italy’ – a question that invites students to search for facts and is easily plagiarised. The new assignment required students to examine why one leading historian on the subject has dramatically changed his views on the topic. Students were asked, therefore, to consider not only Italian fascism’s race policy but the reasons why historical interpretations have changed through time. Assignment 15 asked to apply the approach in an article by the historian, Roger Griffin, to an analysis of any two post-

war fascist movements. To carry out this assignment required skills of synthesis, evaluation and analysis. But it also involved attentive reading of the article in order to understand it before the analysis could begin.

The third assignment raised a number of different challenges for students (see appendix). Students were asked, together with one or two other students, to lead a seminar during the second part of the module. A list of possible topics was circulated and I made myself available to discuss plans with students. Students were encouraged not only to research historical issues but also to consider how to present them to their peers in a way that would encourage discussion and debate. As well as gaining experience in research and presentation skills, working with other students would also aid the development of social networking skills and help an understanding of problems involved in team work.¹⁵

The assessment was based not on the presentation itself but on a student's reflective report on the experience. The advantages in this were: 1) it helped to ensure that students took the seminar leadership task seriously. (The assignment was worth 33 per cent of the coursework mark, whereas assessment for class presentations under the university's regulations can only make up 10 per cent); 2) a piece of written work would make clear the contribution of each individual student to the seminar preparation and delivery; 3) it would allow students to identify room for improvement in their preparation and delivery – observations that would be rewarded rather than penalised; 4) it allowed students to reflect on the research and to make observations on how both the research and the class discussion around it deepened their knowledge of the main issues raised in the module.

¹⁵ For a discussion on the advantages of group work in history seminars see: Tony Nicholson and Graham Ellis, 'Assessing group work to develop collaborative learning', Booth and Hyland, *The Practice of University History Teaching*, pp. 208-19.

Student Approaches to the Assignments

Feedback from students in the module evaluation indicates that many students found the assessment a positive learning experience. 54 per cent said that they found the assignments 'challenging' and 50 per cent commented that they were 'interesting'. Comments from some students reveal an understanding about why the assignments were set and show obvious levels of intellectual stimulation:

- The questions were original and unlike other modules.
- I enjoyed the use of non-traditional questions. It made the essays a little different and more purposeful.
- I enjoyed the alternative essay questions because it felt like it was good preparation for challenges posed in actual jobs/employment after uni.
- Different from normal question so had to think harder on way to answer them, and so gained deeper understanding.
- Required more than just knowledge of fascism, a lot of common sense! They were different from any other course. Not boring or dull.

Some of the work submitted by students was of a very high quality. There were two very good book reviews (Assignment 11), both illustrating ability to understand the book's main thesis, to comment on particular points of interest and to evaluate critically the approach of the author. Some articles for A-level students (Assignment 3) showed excellent linguistic skills in order to explain complex argument in accessible language. There was one exceptional report written for the government minister (7) on the movement led by Corneliu Codreanu in Romania. It could have been sent to the Foreign Office with little amendment. The student who attempted the article for the English Historical Review (2) also produced an outstanding piece of work, not only showing good powers of historical imagination but also making powerful reflective comments on how the task had been approached: 'Trying to gain the viewpoint of a scholar from 1900... involves taking into consideration what has occurred before the date the review was written and what was yet to happen – a very difficult task compounded by the fact that... terms such as 'fascist' had yet to be invented, despite these authors being extremely influential on this later movement.'

It is, however, clear that many students found difficulties with the assignments. In the module evaluation, 46 per cent of students said 'I would have preferred "ordinary" essay questions'. Some of the reasons given were:

- It was different and at times enjoyable but I would have preferred an 'ordinary essay'.
- I was more used to standard essay questions and would have been able to write more coherent essays.
- The questions were useful because they made you think about the answer in different ways. I would have preferred ordinary essays though, as it makes it easier to focus your research.

For many students, therefore, the lack of enthusiasm for the assignments was associated with the problem of tackling a task that was new to them. They felt more comfortable with traditional essays – a form they had been accustomed to know well.

The preference for 'ordinary essays' is also revealed by an analysis of the assignments chosen by students (see table).

First Two Assignments in HR246 (Year 2007-08)

Number	Title (abbreviation)	Choosing Assignment
1	Mussolini TV series	8
2	1900 Historical Review Article	1
3	Article for A-level students	9
4	Survey of debate on Nazism for History Today	10
5	Interpretations of Italian fascism's race policy	2
6	BNP vs The Guardian	5
7	Minister's tour of Eastern Europe	10
8	Preface to book by Mosley	2
9	Commentary on text by Spanish Falange	11
10	Comparison of two interpretations of Vichy France	6
11	Book review	2
12	Historical Advisor on Dr Who	4
13	Compare political relationships in two countries	8
14	Application of Burleigh's view of fascist ideology	0
15	Application of Griffin's analysis of post-war fascism	0

The most popular assignments were the commentary (9), the survey of the debate on Nazism (4), the report for the minister on a fascist movement in Eastern Europe (7) and the article for A-level students (3). Also popular were the TV series (1) and the comparative essay (13). In fact, 72 per cent of students chose their assignments from these six (out of the 15 listed). The choices are revealing. Assignments 3, 4 and 13 were – in terms of the structure required – those closest to essay-style questions. Assignment 9 was a commentary, also a structure that students would be familiar with. In other words, students chose assignments that they felt could be adapted to a type of writing with which they felt more familiar.

The same point is pertinent when considering the way in which students approached the other two popular assignments – the TV series (1) and the report for the Minister (7). The TV series was an opportunity for students to consider how to apply their knowledge to society's most popular communication and entertainment medium. But most assignments tended to be essays giving information about the rise of fascism in Italy – with little explanation about how they would communicate and illustrate the points in the TV series. Similarly, when writing the report for the Minister (7), most students produced what amounted to an essay on Corneliu Codreanu's Iron Guard movement in inter-war Romania. Few students wrote the assignment as a 'report'. More importantly, they did not attempt to relate this history to the present day by explaining to the Minister the reasons why a significant number of people in Romania may now see this movement in a positive way. In other words, students attempted to adapt these two assignments and turn them into traditional essay questions.

It is also instructive to examine the assignments that were least popular amongst students. The number of students who chose the task relating to Dr Who was disappointing – particularly given that it would have been fun to do (and also to mark!). Students were clearly reluctant to engage with both the focused researched required and the historical imagination the Dr Who aspect demanded. The more difficult English Historical Review article (2) only attracted one student for similar reasons (the piece of work noted above). No-one attempted assignments 14 and 15 – which required students to understand and apply a particular historical interpretation to a case study of their choice. Only two students attempted the book review assignment (11), the preface to Mosley's book (8) and the interpretation of Italian fascism's race policy (5). I was initially rather surprised by these choices. The review leaves considerable scope for students to write about a topic that interests them. Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists is normally a popular essay topic for students, as is the question of Italian fascism's race policy. Students were

clearly lacking confidence in their ability to summarise interpretations and to evaluate argument – skills highly stressed within these particular assignments. Overall, the assignments that students avoided were those that involved unfamiliar forms of writing – and particularly those that could not be easily adapted into a traditional essay structure.

In hindsight, I had underestimated the extent to which students were wedded to one particular assessment form – the traditional essay – and their lack of experience in and understanding of how to apply writing skills to a wider variety of tasks and audiences. This point is confirmed by some of the comments made by students in the module evaluation.

- [The Assignments] were new to what I had done before – at times a little confusing.
- As I had not come across similar assignment questions before I found it difficult to know what was expected... Had I had 'ordinary' essay questions my structure would have been better.
- I think there could have been one normal essay question so it was something you could feel secure with – wasn't sure what was expected.
- Different way of writing but sometimes task unclear.
- Ordinary questions would be easier for structure and researching/reading.

Initially, I was rather perplexed by comments that the tasks set were 'unclear' or 'confusing'. The assignments gave, in fact, a much more detailed outline of what was required than that usually posed in ordinary essay questions. On further thought, I surmised that this was indeed the problem. While writing traditional essays, many students tend to avoid focused research in favour of a more generalised hunt for facts and information from easily available sources. This explains the comment that 'ordinary questions would be easier for... research'. These assignments were difficult to complete with such unfocussed research.

Reflection on seminar leadership

The student feedback on the third assignment was a lot more positive. 33 per cent of students found the task 'challenging' and 62 per cent found it 'interesting'. Significantly, 54 per cent also found the task 'useful' (compared with only 12.5 per cent for the first two assignments). Only 12.5 per cent said that they would have 'preferred an ordinary essay' (compared with 46 per cent for the first two assignments).

Most students responded to the role of preparing and leading the seminar with enthusiasm. The sessions were usually well thought out, well organised and prompted good discussion and debate. Some students used film and photographs as sources, others introduced primary source texts. Particularly impressive was the quality of questions posed in order to prompt discussion within the seminar. Students received instant feedback on their performance from a pre-selected group of peers – something that enhanced the involvement of all students in the process. In the evaluations, many students commented on the extent to which they had valued the experience.

- The seminars taken by my peers throughout the Easter term have been a new, constructive way of learning about the central themes of the... course. Consequently the whole experience has been a positive one and has made a nice change to the normally structured seminars.
- ...the whole challenge of giving a presentation and then undertaking a role as seminar leader was an enjoyable and rewarding experience... making the course more enjoyable. Such tasks are not common in other courses and I feel that the experience has been of great benefit...
- It was very useful as it raised the main themes of the course and made me look at fascism from a wider perspective.
- Useful experience gave an opportunity for in-depth research and voice opinion.
- Was a good experience – learnt more in-depth on the topic I researched.
- Useful as want to teach...
- It was fun to have to research and present an argument and discuss it. A nice change from essays.
- It allowed us to talk about subjects we enjoyed more than we had previously.
- I enjoyed discussing what I found of interest.
- Different experience to other courses. Learnt skills that are needed.
- I enjoyed leading the class and could talk about what I felt was important.

The assignment asked students to discuss and reflect on the experience. Most students approached it well – commenting on the way in which they had chosen their topic, on how they had researched it, on how they had worked as a team, on what had worked well and what had gone not so well in the seminar. They also outlined their main findings and discussed how they related to wider issues involved in the module. Nevertheless, while students gave overwhelmingly positive feedback for the presentations, a significant number commented that they had found the written part of the assignment difficult.

- I wasn't really sure what I was doing with the write up... However it was also useful as it was a new way of doing an essay.
- The experience of holding an seminar was great, challenging and useful. It is also in my opinion a key skill. But I would have preferred to have been marked separately on this and had an additional 'ordinary essay' as writing what occurred was difficult.
- I found the experience most interesting as I have not had to give many presentations in other classes. The only problem I could see was with the write-up, as it was quite difficult to know how to structure it.
- I found it interesting and exiting though found the write up tricky.
- Challenging to deliver seminar, writing up was difficult to keep on task but good because of skills gained from doing it this way.

Once again, these comments seemed surprising. Most students had participated in an interesting, and sometimes, exciting project. They had, by their own admissions, learnt a lot. They had been given useful feedback by their peers. Moreover, the points to include in the assignment had been outlined in some detail in the module guide and discussed in class. Yet, many students still expressed an apprehension about the assignment. The fact that most students approached the delivery of the seminar very well illustrates not so much a lack of ability but a lack of experience and confidence when writing this type of reflective report.

Conclusion

More variety in assessment in history courses is necessary to encourage deeper approaches to learning, to allow students the fullest opportunity to develop their potential and to firewall assignments from the increasingly serious threat posed by plagiarism. Developing more varied forms of writing tasks is also necessary to train students more broadly in the methods of the discipline. The choice of assignments undertaken by students in the module at Essex indicates a reluctance to engage in imaginative writing, focused research, reflection and the task of relating history to contemporary debates. Yet these skills are embedded within the practice of contemporary historians. Comments made in the student evaluations indicate that students are wedded to the form of the essay to such an extent that they either lack confidence or find it difficult to engage with other writing tasks. Traditional essay writing has its place and can train students in a range of valuable skills. But its ubiquity within history assessment has meant that students are now over familiar with the form, many managing to adapt it to surface learning approaches. It is time to question the essay's dominance in assessment for history students at undergraduate level.

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February 2009

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Other Resources:

- Coursework.info – essay selling website: http://www.coursework.info/cgi-bin/community/community.cgi?do=user_signup
- Summary of Howard Gardner's ideas on multiple intelligence, see: http://www.newhorizons.org/future/Creating_the_Future/cfut_gardner.html

Appendix 1

Assessment for Fascist Movements and Regimes in the Twentieth Century

You are required to complete three assignments (each valued at a third of the coursework mark).

The first two assignments should be written in 3000 words and chosen from the assignment list.

Note: YOU MUST NOT DO TWO ASSIGNMENTS COVERING THE SAME COUNTRY and MUST DO ONE ASSIGNMENT WITH A PRIMARY FOCUS ON A COUNTRY OTHER THAN FASCIST ITALY AND NAZI GERMANY.

The final assignment is to write a commentary in 3000 words reporting and reflecting on your role as a 'seminar leader' (see below)

Seminar leaders

Every student, preferably together with another student, will be asked to lead a seminar. The choice of seminar should be taken from the topics on the course syllabus. The topic and date should be agreed with the course tutor early on in the course. What you will be expected to do in leading a seminar will be discussed more fully in one of the early seminars. As a minimum it involves:

- a) Giving a brief presentation based on research in order to introduce an aspect of the topic
- b) (Working with another student) raising relevant questions or introducing primary or secondary source material in order to guide other students in the discussion.

The third assignment is to write a commentary on the experience of leading a seminar. It should contain three parts:

- 1) A reflection on the research, planning and delivery of your presentation and seminar leadership. Points could include:
 - A report on the research process; an explanation of how you decided to focus your presentation and other questions/material to guide the seminar;
 - A reflection on your presentation, its construction and delivery in class. What worked? What could you have done better?
 - A reflection on planning of the seminar and, if you worked with another student, how you decided to divide responsibilities.
- 2) A report on the content of your presentation. You could either write up the essential arguments that you presented to the seminar or include a summary of the text of your presentation. If you worked with another student, you must make clear your own personal input. You should include a full annotated bibliography – that is a bibliography containing brief comments on the usefulness of various texts.
- 3) A comment on how the whole process deepened your wider understanding of the central themes of the course.

Appendix 2

Assignment List

You are required to write TWO assignments from the following list.

All work should be presented to the standards expected in the second and third years of an Undergraduate course.

It should be 1.5 or double spaced with footnotes and bibliography presented in a recognised style.

Remember:

YOU MUST NOT DO TWO ASSIGNMENTS COVERING THE SAME COUNTRY and must do ONE assignment with a PRIMARY focus on a country OTHER than fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. (In other words you cannot do assignments 1 and 4, or assignments 6 and 8.)

1. You have been commissioned by the History Channel as academic advisor for a new series on Mussolini's rise to power. The series will be in four episodes. The producer's aim is to 'explode popular myths' concerning the rise of Italian fascism. Write a report outlining your ideas for the series, including: 1) a proposed synopsis for the four programmes; 2) a section explaining your proposals and introducing the producer to the important historical issues surrounding the rise of Italian fascism. You should also include a briefly annotated bibliography to encourage the producer to undertake further reading.

2. You are living in 1900 and the editor of the *English Historical Review* is preparing a special issue on contemporary political and intellectual trends in Europe. You have been commissioned to write an article. The editor has mentioned the following people: Gabriel d'Annunzio, Maurice Barrès, George Sorel, Paul de Lagarde and Julius Langbehn. He wants your article in 2200 words to discuss whether 'something new is going on' and, if so, what it is. As part of this assignment, you should also write around 800 words, explaining how you approached it (including a bibliography).

3. A new history magazine aimed at A-level students has commissioned you to write an article contrasting Roger Griffin's and Robert Paxton's interpretations of fascism. You have been allocated 2500 words. The editor also wants you to write a brief memorandum (500 words) explaining the way in which you have researched and constructed your article.

4. You have been commissioned by *History Today* to write a survey of the debate amongst historians over whether German National Socialism should be regarded as 'fascism', 'totalitarianism' or a 'unique phenomenon'. Although leaving the approach in your hands, the editor has mentioned that it might be useful to explain and comment on arguments by Roger Griffin, Ian Kershaw, Michael Burleigh and Zeev Sternhell.
5. The first edition of Alexander de Grand's *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (1995) argues that there was a clear distinction between Nazism and Fascism on the Race question. The second edition (2000), however, argues that there was a clear parallel between the two regimes on racial policy and that Mussolini's Racial Policies were a logical extension of the essential nature of the regime.' Explain the arguments behind de Grand's 1995 position and discuss the reasons why his interpretation has changed.
6. Nick Griffin, leader of the British National Party, is suing the *Guardian* after an editorial described his party as 'fascist'. You have been commissioned by the paper's legal team to explain the debate over 'fascism' and 'national populism' amongst historians and social scientists. The paper also wants you to recommend whether or not the case should be contested.
7. A government minister is to go on a tour of Eastern Europe. In Romania and Hungary he has been invited to attend commemorative services for Corneliu Codreanu and Ferenc Szálasi respectively. Anti-fascist organisations are calling on him to boycott the ceremonies. You have been asked to write a briefing paper on ONE of the movements led by these two leaders, including a discussion on its links to fascism. The paper should include a full bibliography.
8. A publisher is producing a new edition of Oswald Mosley's 1932 book, *The Greater Britain*. You have been asked to write a preface introducing the book and explaining its significance to the contemporary reader. You have been allocated 3000 words (excluding references and bibliography).
9. Write a commentary of the 'Basic Points' of the Spanish Falange (1933). (The text is available in the departmental library). The commentary should a) explain the nature and background of the text, b) place it in historical context, c) analyse it and comment on its most significant aspects, d) draw general conclusions for its relevance to the study of fascism.
10. Zeev Sternhell has recently argued that the Vichy regime in France 'was nothing else than' fascism. Analyse his arguments and contrast them with those of Julian Jackson.

References:

Z. Sternhell, 'Morphology of Fascism in France,' in Jenkins, B. (ed), *France in the Era of Fascism: essays on the French Authoritarian Right* (2005).

Book review in *American Historical Review*, vol 106, 3.

Julian Jackson, 'Vichy and Fascism' in *The Development of the Radical Right in France*, ed. Edward J Arnold, New York, 2000.

11. You have been commissioned to write a book review for the *London Review of Books*. You can choose ANY book on fascism or an aspect of fascism that has been published since 2004. You have been allocated 3000 words (excluding footnotes and bibliography).

12. You are working as historical advisor on *Dr Who*. The Tardis has landed in Paris on 6 February 1934. You have been commissioned to write a report explaining the background to the events that day in order to ensure an authentic context to the story. The producer has asked you to comment on the strength of fascism in France at the time and whether or not 6 February represented a fascist uprising. He also wants to introduce a baddie based on a real historical figure and has asked for a suggestion.

13. Compare and contrast ANY two of the following relationships. What do the relationships tell us about the nature of fascism?

The regime of General Franco and the Falange (Spain);

The regime of Antonio de Oliveira Salazar and the National Syndicalists of Rolão Preto (Portugal);

The regime of Getulio Vargas and the Ação Integralista Brasileira (Brazilian Integralist Action).

14. Michael Burleigh (*The Third Reich: A New History*, 2000) has described Nazism as assimilating 'biological notions of degeneration and purification to religious narratives of perdition and redemption'. Write an analysis of the ideology of ANY OTHER fascist movement in the inter-war period to determine whether such an analysis is applicable.

15. Assess the arguments in the following article by Roger Griffin dealing with post-1945 fascism drawing evidence from an analysis of ANY TWO movements of your choice.

Roger Griffin, 'From slime mould to rhizome: an introduction to the groupuscular right', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 37:1, 27 – 50 Available at [JSTOR](https://www.jstor.org/stable/414214)
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0031322022000054321>



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ISBN 978-0-9550032-7-1