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BROWN, Gavin T. L.

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The validity of examination essays in higher education : issues and responses

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Abstract

The use of timed, essay examinations is a well-established means of evaluating student learning in higher education. The reliability of essay scoring is highly problematic and it appears that essay examination grades are highly dependent on language and organisational components of writing. Computer-assisted scoring of essays makes use of language features and has demonstrated strong similarity to human ratings. Studies of examiner behaviour show that attention to content and language features contributes to grading decisions. However, given the time constraints on essay examinations, an overemphasis on language aspects may weaken the validity of essay examination grades. This article suggests alternative approaches to the standard essay prompt which should raise the validity of essay tasks and scoring in higher education. Suggested options include redesigning tasks so that organisational and language features are less influential in scoring and the use of content maps. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)