

De-mystifying essays as an ‘a-typical’ publication format

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Forthcoming in

Business & Society

Abstract

Essays as an ‘a-typical’ publication format is an unhelpful narrative emerging in some business schools. In response, I demonstrate that essays have both intrinsic and extrinsic worth in advancing knowledge and having ‘impact’ on practise and policy.

Keywords: accreditation, essay, managerialism, practise, ranking

Acknowledgements: The editors Frank de Bakker and Hari Bapuji deserve full credit for an excellent editorial steer that helped move this commentary toward publication.

The new ‘commentary’ section in *Business & Society* is designed to “generate debate on an issue of wide importance . . . challenge existing norms and rules, and generally invigorate the mind of the reader” (de Bakker et al., 2021, p. 1255). The opening theme was on impact - both theoretically and practically (Aguinis & Gabriel, 2021).

This commentary ties together the challenging of norms/rules and having ‘impact’ through research to highlight that scientific essays are a powerful genre of writing to these ends. For instance, Rachel Carson’s Book *Silent Spring* is now considered a pioneering book written in essay style with significant influence on both research and practice concerning sustainability (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2006).

While the latter development is to be applauded, there is an unfortunate narrative emerging in some business schools, in which essays are referred to as ‘a-typical’ publication format in relation to ‘standard research articles’. In the strategic direction of some business schools (and how performance appraisals/incentives are linked to this direction), the worth of essays is in doubt, and only ‘articles’ count.

Therefore, I aim to de-mystify said narrative regarding two myths; that essays have no intrinsic and no extrinsic worth in advancing knowledge. I posit that writing for ‘impact’ – both theoretically and practically – can be achieved very prominently, but not exclusively, through essays. As such, essays have many advantages, and there are risks if we sacrifice them in favour of standard articles (which, like essays, have their own merit - Lindebaum & Wright, 2021).

Myth # 1 – Essays have no intrinsic worth

What is the justification for the marginalisation of essays in some business schools when within academic (Delbridge, Suddaby, & Harley, 2016) and public debates¹ essays enjoy a renaissance? Indeed, the most cited article in 2020 in *AMR* was a review essay!²

Despite this, some people believe that essays have lesser intrinsic worth because (i) they are ‘easier’ to write than conceptual or empirical articles and because (ii) they can be shorter compared to conceptual or empirical articles. In the first case, the need for ‘disciplined provocation’ (Vince & Hibbert, 2018) in challenging prevailing orthodoxies of thought through essays requires authors to carefully anchor objections to normative misdevelopments at the interface between facts and values. As such, essays often interrogate and negotiate the very conceptual definitions of phenomena prior to empirical work accepting these conceptual definitions at face value. Essays, too, are more challenging to write because one cannot cling to cherished theories or empirical data. Likewise, some colleagues believe that essays are easier to write because they are *not* peer-reviewed. This is plainly inaccurate; established management journals have a rigorous double-blind peer-review process in place, including for essays. Second, only because (some) essays are shorter, it does not imply that they are easier to write. In fact, the space afforded in typical publications can also imply a poor contribution-page ratio - we all have read long but poor articles³. In fact, it is a bit of an intellectual ‘sporting’ challenge to render an argument most powerful with the smallest amount of words. And if length would be indeed correlated with scholarly quality, then of course books should do very well in terms of institutional recognition, which they often do, although not in management studies. In sum, the argument of essays as an ‘a-typical’ publication format is hard to sustain in light of their intrinsic worth.

Myth # 2 – Essays have no extrinsic worth

There are three angles to be considered under this heading. First, essays can have profound impact on public or policy debates. Rachel Carson’s work is only one point in case. However, more recent essays (see Lindebaum & Jordan, 2021) also attract public debate in the form of higher-than-average ‘Altmetric scores’, and through appearance in *Times Higher Education*⁴

shortly after online-first publication. Further, some essays find their ways into practitioner/news outlets even before in-print publication (Lindebaum, Vesa, & den Hond, 2020). Second, accreditation systems, like EQUIS, define research as “as a broad spectrum of intellectual endeavour . . . [designed to] enlarge managerial knowledge and understanding, and improve the quality of a business school” (p. 43)⁵. Thus, EQUIS does not distinguish between publication format, and nor does it get involved in questions of ‘word count’, as longer papers needn’t be ‘good’ ones (EQUIS insider, personal communication, 11 October). The case is identical with how AACSB allows for essays to be considered as one possible category of an ‘intellectual contribution’⁶. Third, in terms of rankings, a similar picture emerges. For instance, the *FT’s* Global MBA ranking 2021 includes a research rank: that is, “the number of *articles* by full-time faculty in 50 internationally recognised academic and practitioner journals” (italics added for emphasis)⁷. The basis here are the articles published in the journals that make up the *FT* journal list. Of note, while the *FT* would exclude “editor’s notes in the research rank”, it is nonetheless the case that “if . . . it’s in the Web of Science, then yes, it could be counted” (*FT* personal communication, 18 October 2021). Indeed, the Web of Science (WoS) also serves as the basis for the U-Multirank *World University Rankings*. While undertaking research for this commentary, I ascertained that essay formats, such as ‘Speaking Out’ in *Organization* are categorised as ‘articles’ on the WoS. Further, it turns out that misclassifications can occur when WoS treats articles as ‘editorial material’ based on the (erroneous) assumption that an essay is not peer-reviewed. However, informing the WoS that certain essays, like ‘review essays’ in *AMR*, are written by authors (rather than editors) and undergo rigorous peer-review, actually led to a correction of the misclassification. Since rankings tend to pick up corrections on the WoS (as one ranking confirmed to me), the effects of these corrections for both individual researchers (e.g., promotion and mobility) and institutions (e.g., rankings) can be profound. Thus, what we

have at hand here is a case of an essay having an impact even before publication! As a final (indirect) example, the methodology of the *Economist*'s Which MBA? nevertheless allows for an indirect influence of research through essays to affect the item "faculty rating by students"⁸. For instance, we can influence student perceptions about our work when we use essays as part of research-led teaching, or when outlets like the *FT* pick up on the latest developments in management - because and not despite these developments are discussed in essays¹.

The aforementioned information demonstrates that the role of essays within academia and public debates, as well as the institutional 'worth' of essays in the case of accreditations and rankings, is well-established. All the more one has to wonder about the material basis for the narrative of essays as 'a-typical' publication formats that appears to gain ground in some business schools.

Conclusion

Demonstrating the intrinsic and extrinsic worth of essays was not only designed to help emphasise the benefits of this genre of writing, but also help colleagues push back against the narrative that marginalises essays in some business schools. It would be truly discombobulating for our academic community when the strategic direction of business schools and associated performance appraisals/incentives become divorced from evidence, or if institutional benefits gathered in accreditations and rankings based on academic essays are not passed on to academics.

Looking ahead, my view that it is conceivable that recent developments only concern the potential marginalisation of essays. In management research, books have already been sacrificed on the altar of 'research excellence' and 'evaluations' as defined by journal rankings. Today, the essay is under pressure in some business schools, but perhaps the 'short

research report' will be tomorrow, the 'methodological paper' next week, or 'commentaries' next month. In the end, what is at stake here is a dictate by business schools on what constitutes legitimate forms of knowledge, and the ways we write to communicate our work to academic and public audiences. But to have said dictate at play – when agreement converges on the intrinsic and extrinsic worth of essays – elates the managerial over the pursuit of truth and knowledge. This insight is as troubling as it is dangerous to the idea of academic freedom. We need to persist in our efforts to interrogate and scrutinize justifications around essays as an 'a-typical' publication format in light of the essay's tremendous potential for impacting theory and practise.

Notes

- ¹ The *FT* regularly draws on essays to inform contemporary thought in management practise. For only one example, see <https://www.ft.com/content/8e3d9386-77c6-11e9-bbad-7c18c0ea0201>, accessed on 28 October 2021.
- ² See <https://aom.org/research/journals/journal-information/most-read-and-cited-2020>. Scroll to the bottom to see the relevant essay by Lindebaum et al. (2020). The WoS is the source for this most-cited article.
- ³ After all, the impact of John Nash's 27 page dissertation on the fields of mathematics and economics was considerable. See <https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/topics/nash-john-1928-2015>, accessed on 18 October 2021.
- ⁴ See <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/publishing-more-they-are-reviewing-reject> , accessed on 12 November 2021.
- ⁵ See https://www.efmdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021_EQUIS_Standards_and_Criteria-1.pdf, accessed on 11 October 2021.
- ⁶ See document "AACSB 2020 Guiding Principles and Standards for Business Accreditation" – available at <https://www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/standards/business>, accessed on 28 October 2021. Note that accreditations often serve as pre-conditions for institutions to be included in rankings
- ⁷ See <https://rankings.ft.com/methodology> (accessed on 28 October 2021).
- ⁸ <https://www.economist.com/whichmba/masters-management-ranking-methodology-2019>

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Biography

Dirk Lindebaum is Senior Professor in Organisation and Management at Grenoble Ecole de Management, France. Prioritizing ideas over disciplinary boundaries, he is interested in better understanding the mechanisms through which we lose (and can regain) freedom at work, be it through emotional or technological means. His work has been published in journals of international distinction, such as the *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Organization Studies*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Management Studies*, and *Journal of Business Ethics*. At present, he serves as Associate Editor for the *Academy of Management Learning & Education* (essay section). The relevance of his work is regularly recognised in news outlets, such as Financial Times, New York Times, BBC Radio 5 Live, Wirtschaftswoche, Daily Mail, Independent, Fortune Magazine and Bloomberg Business Week, to name only a few. For more information, please visit his website: <https://dirklindebaum.EU>