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PEDAGOGICAL ESSAY IN ACADEMIC TEACHING. GENESIS, HUMANIST VALUES, AND DIDACTIC EXPECTATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This study aims at presenting the relations between essay and pedagogy, at showing humanistic values of a pedagogical essay, which is still an underestimated form of exercise that causes some problems to users, as well as its perceived values that have the potential of enriching academic teaching. Student essay is close to the genre with the same name – the literary essay. Therefore, this study links the two: expectations from a literary and scientific essay, and the specificity of a pedagogical essay, which are usually not perceived as distinct forms by student users, and which have a lot more in common.

Roma Sendyka points out that, at the time of permanent crisis, expectations from literary essay include a “plan to save the humanist heritage” (Sendyka, 2006, p. 190). This type of project gained special popularity in the 1980s due to the greater significance of the “oppositionist” and “dissident” nature of the essay, as well as because of its going against all formulas of both the genre and style and the ideological formulas. According to Janusz Sławiński, an essay is an active rebellion against “categorical discourses,” authoritative judgments, against everything that would “limit the scope of discussion” (Sendyka, 2006, p. 190). This characteristic becomes important when we want to point to the students or when they themselves wish to perceive/discover the non-uniform image of the world and become “sensitized” to simplifications and blatancies.

Pedagogical essay, however, is a form of writing that provokes the need to master the author’s own competences in the area of expressing one’s thoughts, reflections, opinions, and interpretations; it is thus a tool for improving hermeneutic competencies but requires conscious work on oneself, special motivation, and students’ becoming more open to the functions of both the language and the text, which goes beyond their narrowly understood professional education (Kaliszewska, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011).

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An essay can be referred to as “pedagogical” not only because of the topics touched upon, but also in order to differentiate it from typical scientific or literary essay, as the objective of essays written by students should be (apart from creative and original approach to the topic) self-education and mastering the skill of expressing one’s reflections, arguments, judgements, polemics, criticism, and self-criticism in writing, as well as undertaking the dialogue with authors of literary works and with the readers of the essay, while also using the prescribed literature on the subject for this purpose. Students should also account for the characteristics of the genre that are absolutely required by the academic teacher, and follow the assessment criteria if any. The nature of such essay, nevertheless, is less individualized and less free than in the case of the literary or scientific essay, which ‘needs no defending’ of the author’s own specificity and competencies.

Monika Jaworska-Witkowska, in turn, while using selected analyses by Roma Sendyka, points to the areas of interest in an essay that are close to pedagogy and worth using to improve the quality of education (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2009; Sendyka, 2006).

This text certainly does not exhaust the subject as regards the essence, varieties, and importance of the literary essay. I refer the interested readers to the rich literature on the subject (Montaigne, 1948, 1957, 1996; Głowala, 1983; Sendyka, 2006; Bańkowska, 2003; Krakowiak, 2012; Tomkowski, 2013), I only point to the issues that might be of greatest interest to the academic teachers wishing to permanently include pedagogical essay to their professional workshop.

THE DUAL GENESIS OF PEDAGOGICAL ESSAY

The pedagogical essay seems to have the dual genesis. On the one hand, it is rooted in literary essays by Michel de Montaigne, the founder of an essay, and his views on education (Montaigne, 1948, p. 20; 1996, 1957). On the other hand, it is a result of 20th-century changes to the school teaching of the mother tongue, where it was postulated to replace papers on a predefined topic, typical at the time, with freestyle, individual student papers.

Montaigne believed that, in education, “there is nothing like alluring the interest and affection; otherwise you make nothing but so many *asses* laden with *books*” (Montaigne, 1948, p. 112). He questioned the existing pedagogical authorities, postulating self-education, self-upbringing, replacement of memory-based learning with learning based on understanding, demanded individual approach in teaching, upbringing in line with the nature, subjection of learning to upbringing, and appealed to the students to engage in individual work, and to the teacher not to interfere with that: “it is good to make [the *child*] *trot* in *front* of his tutor” (Montaigne, 1948, pp. 20-22). As one of the researchers wrote: “Essay is, as acknowledged by Montaigne himself, who built this acknowledgment into his core writing, a process whereby a person learns about oneself and one’s true nature” (Poniž, 1994, p. 10).

The early 20th century brought about new educational ideas related to the aforementioned freestyle paper. Polish researchers showed great interest in the changes started at the Second Congress in Aesthetic Education, Weimar 1903, where the speech by Otto Anthés evoked a heated debate. Janina Mortkowiczówna, who shared the ideas and was fascinated with the opportunities offered by the new freestyle paper, warm-heartedly popularized the knowledge on the subject among Polish teachers.

“In the area of free-style papers, perhaps more than in any other area, the objective of education is to awaken, or rather strengthen the child’s original, instinctive creative passion, to develop the will to express oneself, to skillfully provide the means for such honest expression, and to make it easier to draw from the sources of the thorough and great delight that only one’s own autonomous spiritual creation can provide” (Poniż, 1994, pp. 140-141). The author even formulates didactic principles in the form of “commandments:” “The first commandment in the area of free-style papers should thus be: You shall not prepare the form of your students’ papers, but you shall allow the child to create freely. You shall not impose your own form onto the child, but you shall learn to understand its childish form. [...] The second commandment [...] shall be as follows: Free, unobstructed choice as a principle: provision of topics predefined for everyone as an exception. [...] It is only by this way that the child will unknowingly become aware of the true essence and objective of written expression” (Poniż, 1994, pp. 142-143). These words from one hundred years ago sound familiar, and they still hold true. It is worth reminding that these were the grounds for Célestin Freinet’s free text technique in the 1920s, which was popular in Poland at the times when the achievements of interwar didactics tended not to be remembered, namely after World War II (Kwiatkowska, 1993; Smolińska-Rębas et al., 1995). Therefore, the characteristics of the contemporary pedagogical essay are rightly linked to the former tradition and the resulting principles of focus on the students, the need to listen to their voice and opinions, and on their preparation for active and reasonable participation in social life. Because, in academic practice, essay is still the most frequently used students’ free text on a specific topic, and hardly anyone analyses its functions or characteristics as a genre, I considered it suitable to remind of some studies on the subject that could inspire academic teachers to make greater use of the didactic values of the essay.

According to Roma Sendyka, the author of a study on the awareness of the genre across history, entitled *Nowoczesny esej [Modern essay]*, it is impossible to get to know it well or to actually describe it. “Essay seems to be all at once and nothing at the same time: from poetry through drama and through prose, from literature through specialist scientific papers; we can find traces of its discrete presence in all these instances. [...] If one becomes a fan of this form of expression, a victim to the «essayist bite,» if one becomes worried about the highly uncomfortable question of «what is essay,» this person is in a very difficult position: what one seeks escapes into indefiniteness; what seems present in the text vanishes into absence; what one would want to call the language of literary study becomes unspeakable” (Sendyka, 2006, p. 5).

Many views on essay and difficulties with its definition have resulted in many categorizations of its varieties, uncertainty in determining its assumptions and properties, and problems when attempting to apply it in academic teaching.

HUMANIST VALUES OF PEDAGOGICAL ESSAY

What is also important for the purposes of pedagogy, are the characteristics of the essay that help develop humanist aspects in teachers' education, their interpretational diligence, ability to understand the situation, future empathic attitude to children and students, and understanding of the ambiguity and dilemmas, with the dialogue-oriented and critical approach. When analysing the literature on the subject in the aspect of pedagogical values, Monika Jaworska-Witkowska points out that striving to write an essay can be "a valuable perspective of constructing pedagogical texts and a teleological plan for exercising the essayistic writing as a cognitive, creative approach, critical method, and a means to develop emancipation competencies in the conditions of changing and complex world" (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2009, p. 336).

It can also be understood, as pointed out by Roma Sendyka, as a means to verify information and to record the process of gathering one's personal experience (Sendyka, 2006, p. 42; Jaworska-Witkowska, 2009, p. 337), which, according to Jaworska-Witkowska, means that it contributes to enriching experience, namely improving knowledge (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2009, p. 337).

The structure of the essay permits perceiving contradictions that cannot be brought down to polarization, the "unavoidable conflict of which is a stimulus for human development, providing energy for experimenting, self-learning, and self-creation" (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2009, p. 337). This also means a rebellion against the traditional teaching methods and the teacher's monopoly for knowledge (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2009, p. 343).

The quoted author points to the role of the essay in the process of mind formation, in the organization of the learning process, and in stimulating creative and dialogue-based thinking (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2009).

In her conclusion, Jaworska-Witkowska stresses the need for critical and constructivist education. In her opinion, literature co-creates social communication, and even extends social capacity for understanding, as it uses many languages and styles, sensitizing the reader to other people. And by experiencing the fate of an individual, while built into a literary space, the reader "masters pedagogical competence of listening and understanding students, creates opportunities for constructing flexible didactic principles of teaching against adjusting, against adaptation and socialization understood as cultural reduction, which yields the most original and diversified forms of resistance [...]" (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2009, pp. 535-536).

Pedagogical essay matches this understanding of education, bringing about and

exposing the world of one's values, and providing creative satisfaction, sense of causation, and giving the pleasure of contact with cultural texts.

FUNCTIONS OF PEDAGOGICAL ESSAY

While doing research on the functions of a pedagogical essay in academic teaching, Małgorzata Kaliszewska (2011, pp. 288-300) specified its assumed and potential functions, as well as factual functions, reaching the conclusion that an essay is a multifunctional form, and the didactic function is just one of many. Among the assumed functions, she lists the impressive, creative, and factual functions, while among potential functions: didactic and educational, development support, and a compensatory function. Essay, however, is sometimes not only the object but also a tool for assessment in its evaluation function, while it can also have the masking and repressive function, being a tool of oppression and repression in respect of students. Therefore, it seems that the didactic potential of pedagogical essay has not yet been fully discovered and used for the benefit of academic teaching quality (Kaliszewska, 2011, p. 383).

The essay may also constitute a source of information about the students. An interesting research was conducted at Charles University in Prague in 2007. The objective of the research was, first of all, to analyze the student essay as a reflective and self-reflective deliberation, as specification and justification, because essay "offered" opportunities that were not present in other types of reflective tasks. Secondly, the presentation of selected opportunities for pedagogical work with essays, "oriented at self-awareness processes and processes related to professional identity. For some of them, mass processing of data read in essays may also provide a support" (Tomková et al., 2010, p. 314). For Czech authors, student essay means "reflective and self-reflective deliberations that refer to a specific topic, problem, or question-related to the preceding practical activity, which is expressed through the task that requires argumentation of thoughts while leaving the space for the subjective expression" (Tomková et al., 2010). According to the authors, the definition is a result of compiling the contents and the form of an essay as a task for students. The contents are made of records about experiences and incentives resulting from pedagogical practice, while the form is the essay, a written text in the form of deliberations.

The interest in essay and research this form of written work are justified in two ways. First of all, as the authors state, an essay is based on "humanist psychology" and pedagogy. It stresses the role of the subject in the process of creating the meanings of life events and processes, as included in the term "own experience." In the authors' opinion, the difference between one's own experience and self-reflection consists rather in the degree of managing the awareness processes. In the case of developed self-reflection, it is assumed that it is a result of directed stimuli, as it refers to events that may not be of major significance to the student, yet are nevertheless important

for becoming aware of one's professional capabilities. Own experience is more linked to the personality; therefore, its communication, usually via a story, leads to becoming aware of its unique nature, and of one's own attitude to the profession, children, and educational processes.

The other argument relies on the need to acquire feedback in the teaching processes wherever development is assumed. Therefore, it correlates with the principle of self-reflection in education as an act linking the past with the future. In the pedagogical environment, it is expected that feedback must be purposeful in the pedagogical aspect (Tomková et al., 2010).

Furthermore, as the authors add: the written form is justified for shifting towards a more developed self-reflection as compared to exclusively oral communication. While writing, there will be a need to express the meaning of thoughts and to communicate them in an understandable manner. What has been written is communicated in a different way than what has only been said. In the student essay, this is an opportunity for becoming aware of what has been experienced, for placing this in the context of professional identity, and for becoming the information target in the professional community. This approach certainly assumes conceptual pedagogical work with the essay (Tomková et al., 2010). It is difficult to narrow this part of the chapter to summarize the ideas of the Czech researchers; stakeholders can be referred to the complete text that presents the work with student essay in more detail. For our needs, we should focus on the research question asked by the Czech scientists in 2007. It is as follows: Is it possible to find true information about particular students or students from a particular year at a pedagogical university in student essays? From this question, another question follows: Can essays be used to draw conclusions about the very students, about their motivation for work, about expectations regarding the pedagogical university? Can one observe some tendencies in changing generations of students arriving at the pedagogical university? Can essays be used to perceive a change in the perception of a teacher's profession during the five years of their study? Such research questions have led to formulating briefer questions: 1. What can one read from a student essay on the subject: "Me, the future teacher" asked at the first year of the studies? 2. What is the parallel value of such information? 3. What is the credibility – conformity of the evaluators?

It was assumed that essays would be assessed by four independent reviewers, and the average grade from all four grades can then be considered adequate. Wherever there are high differences between the grades, further conformity is sought to eliminate the disputes. Also, in collective data processing, such "non-conformities" do not affect the results in the case of individual essays if such non-conformities are due to accidental lack of attention on the part of usually like-minded reviewers.

In order to give a collective assessment of a group of students, one reviewer with sufficient precision would thus be enough. In order to achieve that, it must be assured that the reviewer should have the same level of specialization and training in evaluation as the reviewers included in the presented evaluation process.

The authors are of the opinion that, for the purpose of tracking the trends at specific time intervals, one should also assure the stability of evaluation by the reviewers, e.g. by random control of a specific number of essays at selected time intervals. This is all the information about the Czech authors who strived to achieve scientifically credible results. A similar, although less precise, method of evaluation was used when introducing external test evaluation system in primary schools in Poland in the 1990s. Achieving so precise evaluation of essays during everyday classes with students seems hardly possible, although various attempts to do so have been undertaken for many years (Kryński, 1936; Saloni 1979; Kaliszewska 2008, 2009b).

DIDACTIC PROBLEMS AND EXPECTATIONS

The methodological approach to students' essay can be exemplified by the statement by Anna Sajdak, acting as an expert in *Forum Akademickie* and answering letters where academic teachers share their problems. One of the readers to the journal touched upon the issue of requesting students to write an essay as credit component: although I change the topics, most papers are still very similar to one another. After writing the topic in the search engine, one can easily find «ready-made works» so willingly used by students. I feel cheated and discouraged with this tilting at windmills. Should I give up written works at all? (Sajdak, 2014).

In reply to the letter, Sajdak points to various aspects of the methodology for introducing the essay to prevent plagiarism, while she principally gives hints about the types of essays which, when selected, may help to resolve the problem. Justyna, I propose that you resign from descriptive essays in favor of comparative essays, evaluating essays, or discursive essays. Let us not verify students' knowledge on a subject with written papers, as this can easily be done during an exam, but let us require the students to actively process the information, and make use of their "mental software." In comparative or assessing essays, the students' task may be to e.g. list and compare several theories in papers like: discover the similarity and prove that you perceive minor differences in usually similar contents, compare the models in opposition to one another to point out the differences (Sajdak, 2014).

Further on, we can find a very interesting reference to discursive essays. We can also assign discursive essays that would require the students to actively process the information and to construct their own position in a situation where various solutions are possible. Such works will not only test the level of understanding of such contents, but principally a number of mental skills, such as analysis, interpretation, or critical thinking. Discursive essays are an excellent tool to confirm the effects of education in «higher» taxonomic categories, as they pose the students with the need not only to document the familiarity with discursive ideas, but principally to define and justify one's own position, and the ability to argue for a different point of view

(Sajdak, 2014). Finally, the author points to the need for the essay writers to perceive ambivalent phenomena, tensions between extreme positions, and taking attempts to clearly define one's own position by argumentation and pointing to weak points of the other views, which – let me add – requires the writers to reveal hermeneutic abilities. Such examples show that essay can be appreciated, although it is difficult and demanding both for the writers and the reviewers.

Student essays are an accurate tool to master one's hermeneutic competencies, as well as a tool for diagnosing such competencies and evaluating the classes in order to improve the skills, but require the time to make students familiar with the specificity of the characteristics of the genre, the time to write and discuss their contents, to read, and to evaluate them.

Bogusław Śliwerski provided a sort of warning as regards pedagogical essays. It is not easy to write pedagogical essays, as this requires skillful use of knowledge not only from pedagogical sciences, also strictly scientific knowledge, linked with analytical and critical evaluation of educational events, and confronting them with one's own cultural experience (Śliwerski, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Pedagogical essay, therefore, has various faces and functions. When read and written by students, it can build a humanist structure of their minds, extending the narrowly understood professional preparation by providing sensitivity to the world of values, tensions, and wavering, openness to the others, and co-existence in empathy, while also developing their understanding of the changing world and people.

Essay, as briefly characterized here, is not detached from educational reality at all levels of education; it has the potential of creating a new type of teaching which, as perceived by Lech Witkowski, is deprived of didacticism and blunt reporting. According to the author: "Teaching just the skills is what kills innovation and autonomy. Education must have the potential of awakening the imagination, it is to stimulate transformation and to free our action, to build the potential for a citizen, not a slave" (Witkowski, 2018, p. 674). How should we thus make this turn in didactics? According to Witkowski, this will not happen to owe to just one recipe. "The potential of educational movement like the one that existed in the inter-war period is necessary. Something like that may occur if we have the courage to pursue a different culture of pedagogical thinking about what knowledge, imagination, and sensitivity are" (Witkowski, 2018, p. 675).

If therefore, the pedagogical essay could form a tool for transformation, it should be popularized, appreciated, and better known by academic teachers and, as a consequence, also by students.

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PEDAGOGICAL ESSAY IN ACADEMIC TEACHING. GENESIS, HUMANIST VALUES, AND DIDACTIC EXPECTATIONS

Keywords: pedagogical essay, hermeneutic competencies, essay functions

Abstract: Pedagogical essay is a paper written by students, with diversified exercise values, which helps them master hermeneutic and writing competencies, while being a tool for the academic teacher to learn more about the students and to evaluate the quality of one's own curriculum and classes. The expectations regarding the potential of the essay, however, can go much further. Essay offers a real breakthrough in teaching as a process. The objective of the study is to show possible relations between essay and pedagogy, as well as multiple functions essay can have in academic teaching.



ESEJ PEDAGOGICZNY W DYDAKTYCE AKADEMICKIEJ: GENEZA, HUMANISTYCZNE WARTOŚCI ORAZ DYDAKTYCZNE OCZEKIWANIA

Słowa kluczowe: esej pedagogiczny, kompetencje hermeneutyczne, funkcje eseju

Streszczenie: Esey pedagogiczny to praca pisemna studentów o zróżnicowanych walorach ćwiczebnych, umożliwiającą doskonalenie kompetencji hermeneutycznych i pisarskich autorów, a ponadto – stanowi narzędzie w rękach nauczyciela akademickiego pozwalające poznać studenta lepiej oraz dokonać ewaluacji i oceny jakości własnych programów i ćwiczeń. Oczekiwania wobec potencjału eseju mogą być znacznie większe, dzięki jego walorom można dokonać przemiany w samej dydaktyce. Celem opracowania jest ukazanie możliwych związków eseju z pedagogiką oraz jego wielorakich funkcji w dydaktyce akademickiej.



