ESSAI—A METAPHOR: WRITING TO SHOW THINKING

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An "essai" writer responds to the world with a sense of dynamic responsibility. Her task has roots in the European enlightenment and can be understood as a means to critical, personal, and socially relevant writing. My notion of essai (the word means "an attempt" in French) comes from the sixteenth century French essayist Michel De Montaigne who wrote essays to better understand who he was. He wrote in response to ancient philosophers, and he, like them, reflected upon the meaning of one's own life, found in a felt-sense of personal experiences within socially situated realities. His thinking was critical and deep, and it went so far as to inform him on how to live and die. Montaigne valued honest inquiry above word play and verbosity and considered himself a gentleman more than a scholar. For Montaigne, writing was for self-knowledge and understanding of human nature. Consequently, his writing was to actualize improvement in himself and society. In an "essai," one demonstrates self-awareness in the context of socio-cultural situations within which one lives. For example, this article arises naturally from my work as a writer and teacher with the ever-present inquiry: Why write and why teach students to write? From my experiences writing and teaching writing, I find composition is a tool towards understanding social issues in personal ways. I argue that students of composition should be invited to write essais in which they compose first-person life narratives of embodied experiences in the world.

To illustrate my point, allow this small essaistic indulgence. I write true stories of my experiences in a multicultural family, raising three children, and exploring issues of faith. I teach composition at a large state university where I am completing studies for a doctorate in English. As I study writing philosophies and practice pedagogy, the question of why I write merges with questions on the importance of writing for students of various backgrounds studying a range of subjects with different jobs in mind. I consider students' real lives, busy with work and families, as I also teach writing at a community college. Some of my students are adults who have returned to earn their long-awaited college degrees. Particularly adult students alert me to the need (and their ability) to see meaning-making as central to composition. Purpose tends to motivate students

to carve out the time and exact the necessary patience from their busy lives and engage in the task of essai writing. I relate with students at this community college ten minutes from my husband's host-family, with whom we have been living since last Christmas. I understand the push-pull of returning to school and fighting to earn a degree with academic objectives and balance family life. I am motivated to write and enter a public conversation when the subject matters in particular ways to my life. For example, researching vaccinations and writing essays on alternative medicine in the face of rising health costs and threats of increasing bodily toxicity. Answers seem further away the deeper one probes and attempts to understand; however, the care deepens and, ultimately, one asserts a stance as knowledge is gathered (both life experiences and facts).

Writing has been a way to locate myself in time and to contextualize others' lives around me by the concrete act of words on a page. Time seems fluid as I live in an old castle on a hill with extended family. My children swim in a pool where once I first met their father. I have composed essays to understand where I am, and why I'm here. By essai writing, my personal life intersects with my academic life and there is liberty to become self-aware, to construct meanings, and to articulate the purposes emerging in a present vision of life. In addition to temporality, writing can be a resource for increasing wellness by lessening isolation and seeking understanding as one's personal realities are made public. Furthermore, individuals writing essais learn to evaluate socially situated meanings, which they may wish to challenge against their own embodied realities. In the process of realizing one's own positions on issues, an essai writer pays critical attention to details of others' arguments. By so doing, an essai writer becomes more conscious of herself as well as others.

For me, an essai writer analyzes aspects of life and constructs meanings for the benefit of self and others. An essai writer engages others with the passion she encounters in writing to understand relationships among aspects of life that might otherwise have seemed unrelated. Accordingly, an essai moves from close-up-and-personal, divulging details of one's own life, to academic and scholarly, whereby one relates to others' ideas and extends them. In addition, one develops notions and continuously connects the personal and the social to render a cohesive and coherent essai. A composer of the essai aims to push past the obvious and delve into the deeply meaningful, and one is ultimately surprised by understandings gained through writing that relates personal experiences to social issues researched.

Essai writing can be pragmatic, particularly for students of composition, because it is a non-foundational approach to writing that enables a critical, searching spirit and invites students to construct personally relevant meanings within the social contexts of their everyday lives. Composing essais can be in line with

Deweyian philosophy as an experimental, hybridizing act that extends students' thoughts and experiences with others. Furthermore, when students develop greater understanding of their own lives, and learn to compose essais that relate this knowledge, their critical thinking and writing skills develop alongside their sense of confidence as intellectuals.

My approach to writing the essai comes from a pedagogical philosophy in line with critical social expressivism. In order to further discuss the benefits in teaching composition with the inclusion of essai writing, I turn now to an account of scholars whose basic pedagogical principles are expressivistic and whose notions lead us to critical social expressivism.

A HISTORY OF RE-FIGURING EXPRESSIVISM

Harkening back to ancient Rome, composition was the capstone of a classical education, "helping students make a smooth transition of the 'play' of the classroom and to the 'business' of real-world civic action" (Fleming, 2003, p. 109). Language informed students' identities and was a source of power. Ancient rhetors argued for social action in civic arguments at court or in the arena where they aimed to persuade the masses. An argument was structured by one's personal style, including word choice, arrangement, and narrative accounts. There was then, as there is now, a dialectic of form and expressiveness. Today, with my proposal for writing essai, one communicates his or her perception of self and relationship of self with the world. An essai is not only a genre but a way of thinking, and a way of demonstrating thoughtfulness by writing.

John Dewey understood that academic work required a balance of one's attention on what was near and what was more distant. His work has been used by figures such as Janet Emig, Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy, Thomas Newkirk, Lad Tobin, and Donald Jones to refigure the social climate of composition studies. Like Dewey, they understood that "to be playful and serious at the same time is possible, and it defines the ideal mental condition. Absence of dogmatism and prejudice, presence of intellectual curiosity and flexibility, are manifest in the free play of mind upon a topic" (Dewey, 1916, p. 224). Dewey explained at the turn of the century how the self and the world were not separate but necessary for one another. He shook loose the rigid boundaries set around personal versus social concerns and suggested pragmatism serve as the loop hole, the means to a negotiated end. According to Deweyian philosophy, what worked in practice took precedence over, even validated, theory. Therefore, Dewey and his followers perceived the social and the personal as cooperative, and "experience, knowledge, and habits of good living" (Dewey, 1916, p. 224) governed educational practices. In this way, nested dualisms, or concepts that

appeared mutually exclusive, blended and overlapped into complementary forces. For example, Dewey's educational philosophy was a flexible, constructive endeavor:

> Dewey's educational goals focus on the development of certain habits and dispositions rather than on the acquisition of a fixed body of knowledge or belief. He maintains the world is changing. He calls it "unstable, uncannily unstable" (*Experience and Nature*, Dewey, 1958, p. 38) … Dewey wants students to develop flexibility or 'intelligence'—the ability to respond to novel situations, access their culture's resources, reshape their plans, and take positive residue from these experiences. Of course this critical and constructive process must be done, if it is to be moral, in cooperation with others. (Fishman & McCarthy, 1996, pp. 346-347)

With a non-foundational approach to education, the context and the individual within the situation were important. In fact, Dewey advocated active learning or a "reconciliation of tensions between the self and its surroundings" (1916, p. 19). In the writing classroom, this meant personal narrative because the personal experience transitioned into a dialogic, social activity as others related and reacted. In the field of composition, proponents of Deweyian philosophy have argued for the effectiveness in using personal narrative writing in the classroom.

Perhaps the most influential proponents of Dewey's theories written in the field of composition were Fishman and McCarthy. They revisited criticisms of expressivism that proclaimed the movement "dead." Fishman defended expressivism against the notion of the isolated writer. He supported Peter Elbow's use of expressivist pedagogy as a means to better understanding one's self and, ultimately, society. Considering expressivism as rooted in German romanticism, Fishman explained that personal experience was not used for isolation but to identify with one another and restructure community. Elbow and the German romanticist Johann Gottfried Herder suggested writing was a social connection. In eighteenth century German romanticism, people sought unity through diversity. The people didn't trust one another and constructed a social contract to ensure protection: the trade of liberty for protection. The contract united the personal and social—Elbow and Herder suggested we write to understand our own thoughts and to communicate with society, continually reshaping and reforming our social worlds (Fishman, McCarthy, 1998, p. 648).

Neo-expressivists or pragmatists such as Thomas Newkirk, Lad Tobin, Karen Paley, and Michelle Payne examined writing and writing pedagogy from a

non-foundationalist perspective. They advocated use of the personal narrative for pragmatic reasons, but their focus remained predominantly social. Personal narratives were a pragmatic way to develop writers. Newkirk discussed students' autobiographies, or essays, as narratives of development. Erving Goffman's notion of "presentation of self" supported Newkirk's belief that students strived to formulate their ideas, experiences, and understandings into acceptable form through their writing. As Goffman suggested, "in all public performances … we selectively reveal ourselves in order to match an idealized sense of who we should be" (Tobin, 1993, p. 4). Writing personal narratives was viable, explained Newkirk, because students saw themselves as learners, revised beliefs, learned narrative conventions of literature, celebrated self-discovery, and developed critical thinking skills (quoted in Payne, 200, p. xxi).

Newkirk supported the narrative of development, derived from Montaigne, that was challenging and exploratory, open to inconsistencies that demonstrated critical analysis of the self and world. Personal student writing was criticized for cornering the teacher into the role of counselor, but Newkirk pointed out that students who confess their intimate realities want to share, and through the act of writing they become consoled. Students want to have their experiences treated as normal, and their texts allow them this right. Personal narratives were criticized for their emotionality, but Newkirk affirmed the importance of emotion in real life. While there is a place for emotion in personal narrative, he also addressed the need for reason and ethos. The most persuasive writing stems from personal, emotional concerns that are examined reasonably and presented credibly.

Tobin argued that emotion and relationships were essential in the writing classroom. The most effective pedagogical approach depended upon the students' and their teacher's interactions. A writing teacher is not a counselor, but feelings needn't be omitted from writing because of the fear of role confusion:

> By attempting to edit feelings, unconscious associations, and personal problems out of a writing course, we are fooling ourselves and shortchanging our students. The teaching of writing is about solving problems, personal and public, and I don't think we can have it both ways: we cannot create intensity and deny tension, celebrate the personal and deny the significance of the personalities involved. In my writing courses, I want to meddle with my students' emotional life and I want their writing to meddle with mine. (Tobin, 1993, p. 33)

Tobin addressed the expressivist shift of teacher authority, correcting the faulty assumption that teachers got out of the way so students could just write.

Rather, he argues that teachers were still the center of decentered classrooms and the stakes were even higher with personal narrative and conferencing, which gave the teacher more authority. Tobin suggested the real key for student-teacher success was to develop good relationships.

Like Tobin, Karen Paley worked with elements of expressivism and constructed a philosophy which proved useful for her. Paley called herself a social-expressivist and argued that expressivism included, but was not limited to, narratives in which a writer focused on personal experiences. A writer used first-person and could isolate his or her individual consciousness; however, a writer could use first-person and write about social issues without mention of the individual writer's thoughts and feelings, experiences and understandings. Paley's re-assessment of expressivism justified criticisms of the movement's strictly personal focus. She called her notion of the personal essay "psychosocial" and argued that it could communicate social significance—not that it must or should, but that it could (2001). Paley's pragmatic distinction opened the personal narrative genre to the social, while not forcing the social into it indefinitely. To her, personal narratives often represented gender, class, family, and ethnic group matters. Accordingly, personal issues were social, and social issues were personal.

Picking up on the potential of personal narratives, Michelle Payne examined personal narratives that explored physical pain, and surmised that we "stop seeing emotion, pain, and trauma as threatening, anti-intellectual, and solipsistic, and instead begin to ask how we might, like therapists, feminist theorists, and philosophers, begin to recognize them as ways of knowing" (2000, p. 30). The body, she argued with reference to Foucault, was not only a representation of the personal but a composite of the social. The body was "not our own anymore. Or, at least within the academic discussions of the body. It is more text than substance, more a product of language than a corporeal presence" (Payne, 2000, p. xxi). We did not need to fear personal writing, but, rather (as Foucault argues), we should consider the implications of deviant identity, emotion, power, and discipline suggested by writing about the physical body.

THE ESSAI AND CRITICAL SOCIAL EXPRESSIVISM

I propose teaching writing with the essai, following the above conversation on the development of critical, social expressivism. My conceptualization of the essai extends the various discussions above by drawing together aspects of these effective, pragmatic arguments on using personal writing in the academy. For example, my notion of the essai incorporates Newkirk's narrative of development within which one explores and analyzes one's self and the world (Tobin, 1993, p. 4). Writing an essai, one works from a similar pedagogical impulse as

proposed by Newkirk and Tobin who argue that emotion, reason, and ethos inform writing (Tobin, 1993, p. 33). Furthermore, Tobin argues that teaching writing effectively depends upon teacher-student relationships (Tobin, 1993, p. 34). Teaching the essai can foster positive, responsive relationships by the teacher's invitation (by assignment) for students to compose on personally significant and socially relevant topics. Additionally, essai writing can be therapeutic as one realizes that one's personal life relates with others and is, therefore, socially significant. While Paley notes that the personal essay can communicate social significance (2001), so can the essai, even if the tone is highly personal and even intimate. Essai writing can demonstrate an awareness of the body as it moves and thinks within the social situations of life. Furthermore, the act of composing an essai necessitates awareness of the reader. A writer of the essai pays critical attention to how she writes so that another can understand what is personally important to the writer; therefore, it is even more essential for an essai writer to achieve clarity because the message is valuable on both a personal and social level. Additionally, an essai writer evaluates the messages she arrives at from the process of writing and, ultimately, must determine if it is pre-essai writing or personally relevant and socially significant and therefore worth submitting to another.

Within a critical social expressivist pedagogy, using the essai to teach writing in freshman composition is ideal. Essais might bridge the gap between play and rigor in a freshman composition course where students are expected to assimilate within a new academic culture. Using students' own lives as material for inquiry teaches them early on in their academic careers to self-reflect and apply critical thinking to their real lives. However, despite the effectiveness of the essai in drawing together the personal and the social and inviting students to critical reflection, three false assumptions relegate personal narratives to creative writing classrooms: serious writing is void of playfulness; emotion hasn't a place in academic discourse; and private is irrelevant in public institutional settings. However, writing with a spirit of playfulness can motivate the writer. And a challenging intellectual task is to write one's emotions in a controlled and exacting manner. Furthermore, emotion, whether cloaked or exposed, is always a part of communication, as it informs one's positions and leads one to reason in particular ways. When one develops an ethos and reasons alongside emotional claims, one develops an essai.

Though school essays have diverged from essai's original attempt to think critically and construct meanings with personal relevance, scholars such as Graham Badley harken back to Montaigne by his reflective essaying model for higher education. For Badley, as with Montaigne, essai writing is a process where students try out opinions and test responses, reflect on ideas, and develop valuable relationships with others. Badley's reflective essaying model is "the free and

serious play of mind on an interesting topic in an attempt to learn" (2009, p. 248). He bases this definition on four assumptions: that there is academic freedom, that the university is a safe place to be serious and playful, that reflection is useful for students and teachers who respond to questions, and that the process of composing an essay is an attempt to learn (Badley, 2009, p. 249). In Badley's model, learning occurs as writers interpret experiences and reconsider previous interpretations. The writer's objective is to convince an audience that his or her reflections are plausible and to convince another that his or her ideas are useful and even valuable (Badley, 2009, p. 251). The reader and writer together determine what constitutes use and value. Badley's model illustrates that essai writing is social and personal because meaning is made by the construction of relationships whereby the student initiates learning and acts upon necessary impulses and needs. Moreover, by clearly seeing the relationship between the personal and the social, students learn to invest in social concerns and mature past solipsistic and immature thinking "only of me." Importantly, the personal and the social are in relationship.

James Zebroski presents Mikhail Bakhtin's argument that many voices inform one's thoughts and this "accentuates the plurality of a text and the push-pull, center-seeking, center-fleeing forces of the word" (1989, p. 35). Because meanings in an essai can be constructed within relationships between readers and writers, my argument lies beyond the debate of personal versus social impetuses for writing. Instead, composing the essai implicates the individual writer with the writer's audience and, thus, "the author gives [ideas] to the world, neither as a work wholly original, nor as a compilation from the writings of others. On every subject contained in them, he has thought for himself" (Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres,* quoted in Ferguson, Carr, and Schultz, 2005, p. 20). Consequently, essai writing can be personal, social, and cognitive.

Some may still argue that my interpretation of the essai's personal, I-voiced, anecdotal narrativist nature belongs with creative writing. But academic and creative writing have the similar objective of clear, concise, and, ultimately, persuasive writing. By composing an essai, students might learn to reason, present emotion, and demonstrate a trustworthy ethos. Of course, a writer learns to write appropriately for a given audience, and a coffee house reading is not the same as a graduate seminar for which one presents an essay. However, there is more benefit in teaching composition students to write essais than funneling them into an academic vacuum within which the five-paragraph essay becomes a formula for thoughtless composition.

At first glance, academic writing may often have different expectations from creative writing. However, as Carini demonstrates through work with children creating art, prisoners writing poems, and student writing, creative acts can be

pleasurable, therapeutic, and educational (1994). It is not my intention to define the many genres and objectives for writing. Instead, writing as "verbal habits and dispositions oriented to public effectiveness and virtue" (Fleming, 2003, p. 110) is not a form but a way of perceiving and responding with words. Writing to more carefully consider and reconsider things, including one's own experiences, is academic and real-to-life.

An essai is like creative writing and school essay writing, but can be more than both because it is a way of illustrating one's thoughts by details and scenes, as well as research and representation of others' ideas. Importantly, the writer's response to his or her own life and the writer's response to scholarship is what can set the essai apart from other forms of writing and makes it a form that shows one's thinking. Janet Emig observes: "all student writing emanates from an expressive impulse and that they then bifurcate into two major modes," which she calls "extensive" (interactive, writer and situation) and "reflexive" (contemplative, personal meaning-making) (1967, p. 130). An essai can blend these dichotomies through the vein of writing to show thinking of one's own life as well as of others' lives and social issues pertinent to the writer's time and place. The in-between place of the essai serves as a spine and holds together the extending frame that explores and expresses meaning.

Gregory Light distinguishes between creative writing and essay writing and differentiates between surface understanding where students reproduce conceptions and deeper grasping where students transform conceptions. Light argues that when the essay is essentially about another's argument, and not the student's own, the writing can be unreflective and mechanical (2002, p. 258). The goal of an essai is to move past filler words and borrowed thoughts and to demonstrate understanding in specific, personally relevant ways.

Students often find the jump between high school and college writing intimidating. They seem to understand that more is expected of them, and that "better" writing is supposed to result. However, the expectation in much of college writing seems to be a confident rhetorical sense of self. And yet, one's voice is always changing and being found. Diane Glancy argues that one writes as one is written by "circumstance and environment" to make use of one's self as a "found object" (quoted. in Adrienne Rich, 1993, p. 206). In order to make use of one's self as a found object, one must inquire and rethink the familiar. One learns to examine things near and far, and to believe that in the process of seeking to understand relationships among aspects of life, meanings will emerge.

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An essai is an attempt to understand and should be used as such. I view it as essentially a process and not a finished product. Carini argues that students are

composing a sense of themselves, and, therefore, professionals who use writing in such a way could treat these attempts as "thinking spaces" in which students think through "images, ideas, form and media" (1994, p. 53).

However, after the rigors of drafts, conferences, and peer work, instructors often expect students' essays to be polished. I submit that teachers might shift their focus instead on how well students express what has happened to them personally, information and ideas related to larger societal concerns, and meanings derived from reflecting upon that relationship between one's experience and socially relevant issues. Teachers might evaluate work based on how well students have demonstrated the degree their subject holds personal relevance.

Students entering academe contribute to discourse communities by writing their own cultures into existing frames. Through the more experimental, intuitive processes that go along with the essai, we might convey that intellectual rigor is worthwhile because it transcends the classroom. Using the essai can allow students to connect personally to socially relevant issues, respond with confidence, and speak to society in important ways—beginning with the college writing classroom and reaching past it.

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