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Stephen Tchudi

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I Sing of the Essay

Stephen Tchudi

Who am I?
As a bird I fly about,
I sing of flowers;
I compose songs,
Butterflies of song.
Let them burst forth from my soul!
Let my heart be delighted with them.
Aztec Poem

“Composition.”

“Theme.”

“Paper.”

“Essay.”

Four words widely used in the writing business to describe the kinds of writing students do in English/language arts classes. Four words that are too often synonymous with “homework” and the perennial student question, “How many words?” In this article—I’ll call it an essay—I’d like to try to rescue or resuscitate one of those terms and to suggest how essay writing can and should be a mainstay of our English/language arts classrooms, and more importantly, of our lives.

The other three terms I’m content to part with. “Composition” is often applied to writing assignments that are decontextualized, without audience, without purpose beyond the classroom, a word we can do without. Likewise, “theme,” not, I hasten to qualify, as in a theme in literature or a symphony, but as a member of the lifeless schoolhouse writing genres. And the other term, “paper,” isn’t particularly vital to our teaching lexicon, describing the material on which we write rather than the rhetorical context of writer, audience, and purpose. I will argue, however, that the “essay” can be saved,

seen as part of our interest in nonfiction, part of the growing interest in what Mike Steinberg and Bob Root have labeled the “Fourth Genre.”

I wish Bob and Mike had boldly claimed nonfiction as the “First Genre” based on its value and importance. Or maybe the “Second Genre,” for a number of writing theorists have argued that narrative is probably the first genre, as Andrew Wilkinson labeled it, “a primary act of mind.” Storytelling—recalling and retelling experiences—is probably the first and most powerful human language instinct. But as we recognize in this postmodern era, stories are hardly “objective.” Any narrative is selective. Storytellers are biased, forgetful, persuasive, and even rhetorical. A good story can persuade me to change my ways. Writing teacher John Rouse has argued, “We are all fiction makers, and our lives are the fictions that we make” (23). If, then, stories are not neutral, objective, or even reliable records of the past, how do they differ from essays? I’m back to declaring the primacy of “essaying” as an act of mind, memory, language, and imagination.

Any Person Could Be An Essayist

Every schoolchild at one time or another

learns the derivation of the word “essay” from Latin via French: “I try.” I remember learning that definition in my own schooling, but because I was asked to write schoolhouse essays—themes, compositions, papers—“I try” become more of “I try and fail.” The teacher was always there ready to tell me what was wrong with my essays. I was *trying*, but I often felt, “I am on trial,” with the teacher’s red pen (literal color) poised (literally) to show me my failures. (I did, however, once enter an essay contest outside of school and won a pint of ice cream for my praise of a local dairy’s product.)

A better significance of the word “essay” is that of “testing out,” “exploring,” with the focus on ideas in the marketplace rather than learning the forms and skills of writing. “Essay” is related to “assay,” a word we use frequently here in Nevada: taking a sample of something or other—dirt, ore—and discovering its metal or mettle, its value or worth.

When Michel de Montaigne “invented” the essay—the “essai”—he presented it as a personal exploration, as a way of trying out his ideas and experiences for himself and for a larger audience. The essay, Montaigne believed, did not have to be written by the “great” man about “great” thoughts. Any person could be an essayist with ideas worthy of exploring:

And if no one reads me, have I wasted my time, entertaining myself for so many idle hours with such useful and agreeable thoughts? . . . Painting myself for others, I have painted my inward self with colors clearer than my original ones. I have no more made my book than my book has made me—a book consubstantial with its author. (377)

That is, from the beginning, the essay—the *personal* essay—was seen as an act of self creation. Montaigne is nothing less than brilliant, I believe, in observing that by the close of the writing process, the book or essay is “consubstantial” with the author: I am what I write; my writing is what I am.

“Why did I write?” moaned Alexander Pope, “What sin in me unknown/dipt me in ink/ My parents’ or my own?” (282). Many writers have proposed answers to that question, none better, per-

haps, than William Faulkner in his Nobel Prize Speech of 1961. He wrote, “I decline to accept the end of man.” (I assume that were he to revise, Faulkner would change “man” to “humanity.”)

I believe that man . . . is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an exhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet’s, the writer’s, duty is to write about these things. (201)

That’s what the essay at its best is all about: humankind’s unquenchable desire and undeniable duty to turn experience into words for private meditation and public exploration.

Expanding the Essay

At the University of Nevada, Reno, I periodically teach a course in “Advanced Nonfiction Writing.” My subtitle or “theme” for the course is “Expanding the Essay,” and my purpose is to rescue the essay from the misconceptions that my students may have about it, or, more positively, to help them see the role that the essay can play in Moffett’s “universe of discourse.” I open the first class with the epigraph that begins this essay, an Aztec poem that describes human thoughts, ideas, and language as “butterflies of song.” That’s the metaphor I want my class to use for this formerly mundane thing called “the essay”: the essay as song or poem or metaphor, the essay as a spirited voice exercising its personal, public, and even humanistic urge to write things out.

I then read a description of the essay process written by Lydia Fakundiny of Cornell University:

Suppose then, I am engaged in what is called “writing.” Somehow the “I” behind my eyes, as it were, always looking “out,” aware of itself, remembering and dismembering, doubting, probing, speculating, savoring, strives to concentrate and steady itself in a phrase, a sentence, to elaborate itself in the run of words, there, on the page, the screen, paragraph by paragraph. Discourse. Somehow “I” am forming myself right there in front

of my very eyes: my “self” forms itself in and as discourse. And if I keep it up, really stick to this exacting business of writing myself out—not with any finality, no more than a self occasioned by whatever set it in writing, whether a morning headline, a conversation half-overheard, a dog crossing a street, a fleeting dissatisfaction with my own laziness—eventually, what I will have is an essay, or the raw makings of one. (4)

Fakundiny’s description gets at the complexity of essaying, and it is, in itself, a rather tidy one-paragraph essay. (I run off copies and tell my students to post it on the wall or bulletin board near their writing space.) I also quote Virginia Woolf who felt that “the public needs essays as much as ever, and perhaps even more” (386). And I cite master essayist E. B White:

There are as many kinds of essays as there are human attitudes or poses, as many essay flavors as there are Howard Johnson ice creams. The essayist arises in the morning and, if he has work to do, selects his garb from an unusually extensive wardrobe: he can pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter—philosopher, scolder, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil’s advocate, enthusiast. (389)

My task in the essay course is to help my students write those butterflies of song, while coming to understand the range and power of language—their language, their “essays” into the world. (I should add parenthetically, that my aims in this upper division course are about the same as those for my intermediate course, freshman English, or the teaching of writing I’ve done in the public schools.)

The sequence of writing assignments for this course generally follows the familiar cycle of “inner worlds to outer worlds” as described by James Moffett and others. We write (I join in as a teacher/writer) first about material in the reservoirs of mind

and imagination, about people, places, events in our past and recent present. Then we move outward, looking at people, places, events that fall within our range of vision in the here and now, finally moving toward more abstract and issues-oriented writing, where the task includes “researching” in the form of idea gathering, as well as synthesis and reflection. The sequence is designed to show students that even the most abstract of public, argumentative, academic writing has its sources in the essay, that even if one is told to eschew the first person, that the eye and the I must play a powerful role in writing.

In the first eight weeks of the course, the students write six essays, usually about 750 words—three typed pages—and revise two of the six for publication in a classroom periodical. We follow writing process pedagogy, with a good deal of in-class workshopping, revising, and editing. Students also read in an excellent anthology of classical and contemporary essays edited by Edward Corbett and Sherry Finkle. (As the reader will see from my bibliography, this book is the source of many of the quotations that I’ve used to frame and define the essay.)

Mini-exercises and “Warmups”

Of greater interest to *LAJM* readers may be some of the mini-exercises and “warmups” that we do along the way. Once each week, to help students see the range and potential of the essay, I have them do impromptu exercises and writings, essaying in ways they might not have considered previously.

- The postcard essay. The very first day of class I show up with a stack of stamped postcards and have the students write to someone—anyone—perhaps a person they’ve been meaning to correspond with, or a distant friend, or even a political leader. Describing the essay as a reaction to experience, I supply students with some starter lines: “Today I noticed . . .” “On my way to class I observed . . .” “I was just thinking/puzzling/wondering . . .” These postcards go in the mail at the end of the class. “You’ve just written your first essay for this class. It wasn’t all that painful, was it?”

- The bumper sticker as an essay. We generate a list of popular bumper sticker slogans on the board and look for rhetorical patterns. One common bumper sticker reads: “I “heart” X,” where X can be anything from a city (“I love NY.”) to pets (“I love Pomeranians”). Another formula we discovered is this:

Occupational nouns do it with noun, adjective, or adverb punning on sex and the occupation.

“Teachers do it with class.”

“Artists do it in oils.”

Other patterns: “Honk if you verb.” “If you don’t like my driving call 1-800-phone acronym, usually insulting.” Then my students generate their own bumper stickers, both following the formulae and in original patterns. Next we discuss the slogans’ essay-like qualities. For example, like an essay, the bumper sticker is persuasive; it grows from one’s observations of the world; it presents the final product of meditation and reflection. Bumper stickers differ from argumentative essays, we realize, in that the one-sentence statement avoids rhetorical development and amplification, assuming that the slogan/phrase, if it’s clever enough, makes the point without the need for more explanation or support.

- The joke as an essay. The students come to class with a joke to tell, jokes to be clean enough for public recitation.

“I just heard that Federal Express and United Parcel are merging into a new company called FedUP.”

“In golf, hitting the ball to the left is called a hook, hitting it to the right is called a slice, and hitting it straight down the middle is called a miracle.”

How is a joke like an essay? Virtually every joke is a commentary on human existence and frustration, on human foibles, human vices. Most jokes, as my students observe, can actually be turned into essays. The advantage of essaying by means of a joke (like the bumper sticker) is that you don’t actually have to explain your premises, your warrants. We conclude that jokes are especially powerful because they mask their assumptions and resist rebuttal.

- The haiku as an essay. After cautioning students that the English language haiku are at best an approximation of the Japanese originals, we look at several in translation:

Morning-glories! See!
And these also are not
Companions for me.

-Basho

The dews disappear:
“this world is dirty, and we have
No business here!”

-Issa

My students write some haiku and observe that the haiku (and virtually any other poem) is a condensed essay: an observation, a response, a call for action. This little exercise also helps the student see that essays need not be written in the dry diction of the schoolhouse, that it’s quite acceptable to use poetry and to employ poetic perceptions and language in their writing. I’m out to erase the traditional and artificial distinctions between prose and poetry, between essay and poem.

- Reading as an act of essaying. Our class anthology includes selections by Helen Keller and Frederick Douglass on the empowering force of language. As people read, as they learn to construct meaning in words, they gain insights into their world. As described by Paulo Freire, reading liberates. The link to the essay, of course, is that reading, like writing, is an act of meaning making. One’s response to a text, oral or written, is in fact an “essay” on one’s own observations of the universe.

- Drama as an essay. We write one-page scripts—mini dramas—based on human conflicts to discover that a play is a re-presentation of human experience and is necessarily a commentary, an essay. I have students generate some characters that we list on the board (any kind of character, from kids to aliens, mythical gods and goddesses to contemporary heroes and heroines); we then place those characters in a confined space or “setting” (a bar, a spaceship, our classroom) and let them interact. Essays result.

- The map as essay, Part I. I bring in a variety of maps: topographical maps, highway atlases, maps of the campus, diagrams of electrical circuits, a written set of instructions on how to get from one place to another. By now the students know my question and virtually chant it: "How is a map like an essay?" In addition to the more or less obvious answer that a map, like an essay, is a person's attempt to represent his or her view of the world, this mini lesson gives me an opportunity to recite the general semanticists' mantra: "The map is not the territory. The word is not the thing. The symbol is not the thing symbolized" (Hayakawa). This allows us to discuss the gaps between mind and word, between the "idea" in the head and its representation on the paper. We revisit Montaigne's claim that writing and the writer are "consubstantial" and note some differences: We are what we write, sort of.

- The map as essay, Part II. I also have my students make "maps" of the essays we are reading. I want to get them away from the notion that essays—that writing in general—is neatly outlinable stuff, linear, driven by topic sentences and introductions toward inexorable conclusions. As students try to track our essays, they find that the metaphor of a road map in mountainous territory is a more successful descriptor of the lines of argument that emerge. We see that essays meander like a stream. We explore the idea of an essay as a ramble. We discover that "the point" of most good essays can seldom be encapsulated in a single sentence, that the "meaning" of essays emerges from a complex network of the essayists' intellectual and experiential highways and byways. I encourage the students to map essays any way they can: Some draw literal and metaphoric maps; some draw drawings; some write out summaries or paraphrases or even poems. We compare maps of essays and discover that despite differing ways of representation, we often are trying to "get at" the same things: the essence of an essay's blend of structure, content, style, and voice.

- The visual as essay. Going modestly high tech, I bring in my electronic camera, my

laptop, and a big screen TV. I tell the students of my amateur's theory of photography that one can take an interesting picture of anything, if you work to frame it, seek an interesting angle, creating a picture that "says something." "Ah," the students say, anticipating my direction, "The photograph is an essay!" But we do a bit more. Our classroom in Old Education is an uninspiring windowless room with institutional ivory walls, grungy carpet, plastic desks, and a pile of junk in the corner left over from when the heat ducts were repaired two years ago. "What's the rhetoric of this room?" I ask the students, and small groups attack this problem in various ways. One group writes a physical description. Another tries to describe the "symbolism" of the room and its furnishings, what it "says" to the students about their education. A third group writes a poem about the room. The fourth works with the electronic camera to show us the place: shots of desktops, stains in the carpet, the junkpile. Somebody climbs on my desk and shoots looking down at the pattern of school desks; somebody else photographs a map supplied to the custodian by buildings and grounds showing how desks are to be "properly" arranged in a grid. We download the images into the laptop and project them onto the TV screen. While some of the photographers sequence these to create a slideshow, the rest of the students read and blend in their verbal descriptions/essays about our room. (At the close of this class, each one of us carries out a piece from the junk pile and deposits it elsewhere.)

These "warmup" or stretching activities, coupled with our readings and weekly writings of essays, get us to the midpoint of the semester. My aim by then is for the students to have an expanded notion of "essay" and to have gained considerable fluency as essayists. Analogous to my theory of photography, I tell them—challenge them—to see that an essayist can compose upon almost any topic, using the vast array of language strategies and genres that are available.

New Directions

At midterm we move in new directions. First, I

have the students take up essay reading and writing projects of their own choice, projects that may require six to eight weeks to complete, leading to a final product and a presentation for the class. One student is planning to read about baseball, write memoirs of games attended, and write a prose/poem/essay that captures her fascination with the game. Another student, who has always doubted his writing ability, simply wants to get published, so we make plans for him to develop a “Your Turn” column of 500 words that our local paper cannot possibly turn down. An English major decides to read the nonfiction of Alice Walker and to write about it in a critical essay that will help her write such essays in other classes. A landscape architecture major collects calls for proposals from his discipline and practices “the proposal as essay,” mastering the lingo and rhetoric of proposal writing. In class, students bring in project materials, drafts, revisions to share.

While these independent, culminating projects are in the works, I launch another in-class essaying exercise. This idea originated in a graduate class several years ago, when I developed the “Lake Wobegon Project.” Using Garrison Keillor’s fictional (yet not-so-fictional) village as a model, students created their own fictitious village, populated it with characters, and like Keillor, generated a network of stories, a hypertext, about the town. In my next variation, students in an undergraduate class created a Millennial Village with a science fiction focus: a fictitious city in the year 2101, leading to writing that projects current local, regional, national and global issues into the future for speculation.

For the essay class, I have the students “Essay Utopia.” With presidential elections coming up, there are plenty of issues available for discussion and a variety of nonfictional forms for students to explore. Our in-class, impromptu activities include:

- Generating a list of major election-year issues and “essaying” the key variables in each. In this project, we try to make our essays neutral in tone—just the facts, just the issues—to provide a portrait or profile of the central election-year concerns.

- Debating values and beliefs. Using Stephen Toulmin’s logical scheme of “data,” “warrants,” and “claims,” we see how different facts, subject to different values or warrants, can lead to different conclusions or claims. Using Republican, Democratic, Reform Party, and Libertarian warrants, we examine the essay-as-debate, writing claims, rebuttals, counterclaims and counterarguments.

- Writing proposals for action. Surveying our list of issues, we brainstorm for possible solutions, and write in the proposal genre, creating position papers or “white” papers on various problems: environmental degradation, the economy, the wealth gap, the physical infrastructure.

- We create candidates in words. The candidate him or herself is never described. Rather, in small groups students write short speeches on the candidate’s behalf, a platform or a series of positions. These speeches are delivered on behalf of the candidates, and audience members write character sketches (called “essays,” of course) based on the ethos and substance of the speeches. In this way we are back to Montaigne and the consubstantiality of writer and person.

Discovering Their Own Eloquence

The class draws to a close with student presentations of their longer, independent projects. I think it’s safe to say that by then the students have discovered the accuracy of Oliver Goldsmith’s discussion of “eloquence,” which, he claimed, “has preceded the rules of rhetoric, as languages have been formed before grammar. Nature renders men eloquent in great interests, or great passions” (260).

Early in the course, I was deeply moved by a student who wrote about a third grade teacher who told her that her grasp of nouns and verbs was insufficient for her ever to write. (Why does our profession have so many similar stories of people who were told their writing was no good, not up to par, never could be creative?) This student then went on to describe and to thank a later writing teacher who gave her confidence in her own abilities, enough that the student is now a writing major, albeit one

who has constant and nagging doubts about her own ability. I wrote back to her about my credo, that every person is a creative writer, that everybody has important ideas and observations and reflections to put into writing, not only for personal reflection, but for the erudition and enlightenment of other people. We are the humankind that Faulkner is writing about, and we not only have the duty but are endowed with a natural eloquence that permits us to write and speak successfully of these important matters. There is, of course, much more to eloquence and rhetoric than simple or sincere passions. But in our quest to rescue the essay from its fate as a schoolhouse genre, I think my students have come to discover their own eloquence.

More important, I believe that there's more to the essay than eloquence or even this mysterious thing we call "good writing." In helping my students become essayists, and in urging all of us in the English/language arts to help our students be essayists, I am advocating an "essayish" way of seeing, thinking, learning, and acting. In the end, the essay—whether written or spoken, whether poem or photograph, whether long and argumentative or pithy and witty—is a reflection of a way of seeing the world and responding to it. The essay can help students to make sense of their own universe. The essay has the potential to teach a way of life.

Thus I sing of the essay.

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About the Author

A past president of MCTE and NCTE, Stephen Tchudi is Chair of the English Department at the University of Nevada, Reno.