

The Literary Essay in the Age of Twitter

This is the first occasion when I have had the opportunity to present an essay to you, and I would like to begin by acknowledging — with gratitude and admiration — the pleasure I have had in listening and responding to many of you who have read fascinating essays on a wide range of intriguing subjects. It is a privilege and a pleasure to be in your company intellectually and socially.

The title of my remarks this evening is: “The Literary Essay in the Age of Twitter”

Here’s what I would like to accomplish this evening. I would like to recount to you — as succinctly as I can — the nature of the reading, thinking, and writing most of my students are currently doing. I would then like to explain why I believe it is essential that we reclaim the importance of the literary essay in contemporary American education and public discourse.

Here are two operative assumptions informing my observations about the current generation of secondary school and university students in the United States:

1. Students are not reading less than in the past. They are reading more, but they are reading different texts — and reading them differently — than previous generations.

2. Students are not writing less than in the past; they are writing more, but they are writing in different forms, and they are using different, and more truncated expressions, in their writing than previous generations.

That’s the encouraging news. Here’s what we should be concerned about: much, if not most, of the reading and writing university students do today is reflexive.

Impatience and anxiety most often characterize the reflexive reading and writing students do in their courses.

The impatience so many students display has become a deeply conditioned response to two unrelenting pressures in contemporary culture: time and the stipulations of others. Both are measurable, and one is often a function of the other.

I'd like to unpack two examples. The first is from contemporary media. Twitter has a limit of 140 characters, including spaces. Each character is actively monitored and measured. Twitter's 140-character limit is displayed and counts down as the "writer" types. If the writer has something to say, then he/she ought to say it quickly and succinctly.

In school settings, students face similarly stressful pressure, but expressed in different ways. They are told not only what to write, but also how much to write, and when that writing must be finished. Consider the nature of the pressured circumstances within which most students actually write and the tools they rely on to measure their progress. In Microsoft Word, a "word count" appears at the bottom of the window. The pressure for many students in these circumstances works in the opposite direction from Twitter: writing for many students means "filling up" the word count until they reach the amount required by their instructors. In writing within either set of pressured circumstances, these young writers are constrained by many expectations that are not their own.

These kinds of pressures become further distorted in essay exams and in standardized testing. Writers are trained to be brief — principally because of time constraints. Yet it is common knowledge that longer essays tend to receive better scores. For many students, essay exams — to satisfy either the demands of their courses or the SATs — are exercises in frustration and futility. This might well be why research suggests that the SATs are currently a reasonable predictor of success only in the first-year of college study.

Most of American higher education is structured on a one-draft/one-grade system. The operative assumption is that instructors do not have the time to respond to multiple drafts of their students' thinking in writing. Within these circumstances, students write to avoid making mistakes — to satisfy the measurements pre-scribed and to avoid penalties. The principal result of writing in this context is a “final” measurement: the grade that, within a relatively simple mathematical scale, evaluates the qualities of a student writer's work — and, by extension, the “quality” of the student. It is no surprise then that the principal anxiety of both high school and college students is expressed as a fixation on grades — and especially on avoiding poor grades. It's also no wonder that many, if not most, students write to avoid making mistakes rather than relaxing into their eloquence.

Given the authority figures their instructors often embody, these students often report that they do not see themselves as having much latitude with language — beyond satisfying what are — at least occasionally — the unclearly articulated requirements of their instructors.

The reluctance of many young writers to venture with reading and writing — and with language more generally — is more than occasionally reinforced by the stereotypical, domineering figure of the instructor who does not tolerate mistakes. Such classrooms resemble educational buses and trains: one driver or conductor up front with too many people along for the ride and following predictable patterns of self-protective behavior, day-dreaming, or staring blankly out the window. These students write to avoid error, and their papers are often returned saturated in red “marginal” notations that look more like field notes from a MASH unit than an effort to help and encourage an inexperienced writer to use language effectively.

It might be more apt to characterize the students I work with at Berkeley as entering the campus gate ready to write — outside their classes. Many are accustomed to circulating

(“publishing” is not an inappropriate term here) — with frequency and urgency — their own narrative renditions of their latest experiences. The metaphoric language they so easily summon on Twitter is — unfortunately — usually absent in the institutional prose they write

The fast-paced, highly charged Wi-Fi world in which we all operate far more noticeably inflects the daily lives of nearly all of my students. They enter the courses I teach with several years of experience writing and reading informally in a busy, pressured, social environment driven by speed, brevity, agility, and an innate improvised, ad-hoc character.

Through frequency of practice, many, if not most, of these students have become reasonably comfortable — and proficient — writers, especially to one another, in the abbreviated forms of prose readily available to them through text- messaging, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and the ever-burgeoning number of social media platforms. These “programs” (and I’d like to summon all of the resonances of the word “program”) are among the most prominent of an ever-increasing array of rapid-fire ways for students to exchange information and ideas, to express and establish identity, and to negotiate friendships and social networks.

In addition to my anecdotal experience, there is increasing evidence of the widening fissure between the social and academic practices of current undergraduate writers. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey on media in the lives of American youth reveals that young people spend an average of six and a half hours a day using media — including watching television, listening to music, playing video games, as well as writing and reading on line through interactive media — nearly the equivalent of a full-time job. In contrast, these same students set aside an average of 50 minutes per day for homework

Another recent study, entitled the “Digital Youth Project,” found that “most youth use online networks to extend the friendships that they navigate in the familiar contexts of schools, religious organizations, sports, and other local activities.” Most of their communications online are in effect “‘friendship-driven’ practices.” A smaller percentage of youth engage in online communication “to explore interests and find information that goes beyond what they have access to at school or in their local community.”

In such friendship and interest-driven online activities, students create “new forms of expression,” and, by “messing around” with new forms of media, they become not only more literate about technology and media but also engage in more self-directed learning activities. Today’s students are more comfortable learning through the freedom to explore online than through the strictures of responding to pre-scribed goals in academic settings.

The speed, ease, and frequency with which they exchange instant messages with peers also suggest that they regularly practice the skills of deciding when, what, and how to communicate, however shorthand the language, syntax, and forms they use. These students most often succeed in writing, but without thinking much about the structures and styles they use in these brief and informal exchanges of information and ideas.

The research findings of the Kaiser Family Foundation as well as the Digital Youth Project are also consistent with a growing trend among many Americans, especially students: the ease with which they multi-task. They seem quite comfortable engaging routinely in what Linda Stone, formerly at IBM, first called the habit of “continuous partial attention.”

Scott Kirsner, a contributing editor at Fast Company magazine, provides a succinct account of how continuous partial attention works:

Continuous partial attention is that state most of us enter when we’re in front of a

computer screen, or trying to check out at the grocery store with a cell phone pressed to an ear — or blogging the proceedings of a conference while it’s underway. We’re aware of several things at once, shifting our attention to whatever’s most urgent — perhaps the chime of incoming e-mail, or the beep that indicates the cell phone is low on juice. . . .

[Tell the anecdote of the student taking superb notes and buying argyle socks on line

My informal conversations with undergraduate English majors reveals a consistent point about their reading practices: even the most accomplished of those students who have chosen to focus on reading and writing as their major do not read more than a few pages of prose consecutively — without turning their attention to another peripheral activity or interest. According to Linda Stone, devoting full and focused attention to someone, to something, or to some activity will be what she calls “the aphrodisiac of the future.”

Teachers are often the first to recognize — and pay serious attention to — how easily students can be distracted from the learning at hand. Adjusting to these new conditions for teaching and learning can be quite challenging for faculty, and especially for those who have come to expect undivided attention from their students. Those of us who take pleasure and satisfaction from helping students articulate — and exercise control over what they want to say and how they want to say it — need to adapt our pedagogy to respond to these new circumstances.

My aim in offering these observations is simple: as an educator I have an ethical obligation to align the reading and writing skills students bring with them to the university with the more traditional methods and structures I require of them — the same experiences I hope will serve them in the professional world.

The pedagogy that underpins my belief as well as my practices is grounded in a simple concept: there is an enabling power as well as a stabilizing effect in working with students to discover the possibilities inherent in the kinds of writing they already practice successfully. The teaching principle is start where students are able. There is abundant evidence that students are indeed writing frequently, quickly, and — given the responses of their peers — effectively.

This principle suggests that we should start college and university students with short forms of prose. Working with recognizable — and replicable — simple structures and short forms makes it easier for students to relax into articulating their ideas effectively.

Practicing with the reflective principles and spirit of the literary essay also makes it far less likely that student thinking and writing will be derailed as they develop the controlling idea in each draft they write. To implement these aims, I suggest that we faculty provide students with abundant examples of clear, nimble structures for writing and provide practical advice about how to adapt and extend the skills they're already practicing successfully in informal social activities as a means to help them make the transition into drafting clear, intellectually expansive, and compelling essays.

Most of my students do not slow down enough to read carefully and to think critically. They are too anxious — and impatient with themselves and the prose they are reading or writing — to relax into the sustaining pleasures of reading — and writing — more reflectively.

Reflective reading and writing are marked by pauses, by engaging intellectually with the subject at hand, by moments of delightful lingering and contemplation. Reflective writers and readers settle into a subject and explore its resonances. Doing so requires time and a commitment to reflection.

The literary essay fulfills each of these expectations. Yet, throughout what amounts to a four-hundred-plus year history, the literary essay has been sequestered in the margins of literary production and critical reception. The essay has received, for example, little attention in the standard literary histories. It is almost as if such writing did not — and still does not — exist. Nor has the literary essay fared any better in either college curricula or English studies.

The lack of reflective writing amply evident in much of the university and far beyond is deeply rooted in modern culture. In a review of the literary status of the modern essay, published in The Times Literary Supplement in 1922, Virginia Woolf described the problem from the essayist's point of view: "To write weekly, to write daily, to write for busy people catching trains in the morning or for tired people coming home in the evening, is a heart-breaking task for [people] who know good writing from bad." (304)

Given the pressures of time and commerce, the distinctive features of the literary essay gradually disappeared from nonfiction prose. Woolf describes the problem for essayists in these terms: "a common grayness silvers everything. . . . It is a kind, tired, apathetic world for which [essayists] write, and the marvel is that they never cease to attempt, at least, to write well." (304-05)

The tradition of the literary essay is distinguished by a fascination with creating a distinctive personal voice speculating in surprising, tentative ways about enduring subjects and issues. As Virginia Woolf implies, the factual machinery of the article replaced the reflective nature of the literary essay. The distinctive features of an article (and the expectations of its readers) are an insistence on the impersonal and the semblance of certainty and thoroughness in dealing with timely topics.

The literary essay resists the illusion of a simple, logical world. The article builds intellectual scaffolding; the literary essay dismantles it. The literary essay is an introspective form of writing, its author's voice unique. The article remains extroverted, its voice representative.

The literary essay depends on the writer's artful blend of reflection and perspective — on the writer's ability to draw in readers. In contrast, the article draws from and privileges abstraction and generalization. Consider three of the most successful magazines in the 20th century — Time, Life, and Fortune. Each was founded as anonymous collective efforts to supply enough “facts” about a timely subject or issue to enable readers to make reasonably informed judgments. In such cases, the style belongs to the magazine, not the writer. This authorial anonymity epitomizes another expression of Virginia Woolf's “common greyness.”

School and college writing courses gradually adopted this standard, excluding the first person “I,” which was judged an unwarranted distraction from the efficient flow of information or explanation. Within this context, the literary essay was relegated to the margins of English departments — to Freshman English — where it became the province of inexperienced graduate student instructors and defined in negative terms — as “nonfiction.” In effect, the literary essay was squeezed out of a college curriculum devoted on the one side to viewing writing / “composition” in utilitarian terms and on the other side by privileging the aesthetic qualities of poetry and fiction.

It is not difficult to extrapolate the argument used to eliminate the literary essay from most post-secondary instruction. The “reasoning” goes something like this: life is too fast-paced, too frenetic, and too intellectually strenuous to accommodate the essay, a form of literature that is “impractical,” that assumes a contemplative, leisurely, and speculative relation

to the world. There's a profound irony embedded in the widespread unawareness among educators and the educated public of the benefits of the literary essay's leisurely, speculative, and contemplative qualities — especially in a culture that is fixated on redefining oneself in terms of leisure-time activities.

At the end of Virginia Woolf's anxious assessment of the state of the modern essay, she describes what she calls "the contemporary dilemma" as a "lack of an obstinate conviction which lifts ephemeral sounds through the misty sphere of anybody's language to the land where there is a perpetual marriage, a perpetual union. Vague as all definitions are, a good essay must have this permanent quality about it; it must draw its curtain round us, but it must be a curtain that shuts us in, not out. . . . The art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea. It is on the back of an idea, something believed in with conviction or seen with precision and thus compelling words to its shape. . . ." (307)

The point Woolf makes here prompts me to offer a modest recommendation: that we adapt what I understand to be the founding principles of groups such as the Chit-Chat Club and that we advocate — in schools, universities, and in the far reaches of civic conversation — the spirit and substance of each distinctive feature of the literary essay that I have tried to identify this evening: its engaging and distinctively personable voice, its contemplative pace, its leisurely syntax and ambiance, its spontaneity, its ability to evoke an appreciable sense of pleasurable surprise for both writer and reader. Each of these features is remarkably well suited — and readily adaptable — to the current cultural circumstances within which each of us continues to take great pleasure and enjoy surprise as we write and read and reflect on the world around us.

Providing inexperienced writers with the time and encouragement to express and develop these features in their writing — to relax into their eloquence — might well yield an additional benefit: ceasing our nation's unethical habit of requiring students to pretend that they know something, be it a skill or a subject, without having provided them with adequate opportunities (and enough time) to develop — with practiced confidence — the ability to move from repeating information about a subject or explanations of it to enabling them to exercise authority over or authorship of it. In order to accomplish this, we need to develop new, working definitions of the literary essay, provisional statements that recontextualize the literary essay and thereby free it from the burden and seeming constraints of being associated with a particular class identity.

Reframing a definition of the literary essay in democratic terms may well also refocus attention on the enduring pleasures of writing essays — what Virginia Woolf calls the essay's ability to "lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake refreshed with its last. . . . The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world." Yet this drawing in, this absorption in "short lengths of prose" will "sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but an intensification of life — a basking, with every faculty alert, in the sun of pleasure." (xxx)

The literary essay offers the most democratic form of access to the enduring pleasures of writing and reading. In this sense, the operative assumption is that anyone can write a literary essay. The essay is also the most egalitarian form of literature because it admits the broadest range of subject matter, structure, writers, and readers. Yet, perhaps it's because anyone can write or read an essay that the form has lost its status as a privileged literary genre.

I will close with a simple recommendation: let's replace our nation's fixation on speed, exposition, and argumentation with the intellectually generative satisfactions of writing and reading literary essays. Let's reclaim the literary essay — and reposition the essay closer to the center of public discourse. If we move the needle even slightly, the next generations of writers and readers will be better prepared to contribute to a foundational value that informs our nation: a fully literate and participatory democracy.

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February 12, 2015