



VIEWPOINT

A reflective essaying model for higher education

Graham Badley

*Research, Development and Commercial Services, Anglia Ruskin University,
Chelmsford, UK*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to outline a reflective essaying model as a useful way of encouraging learning in higher education. It aims to define reflective essaying as the free and serious play of mind on an interesting topic in an attempt to learn.

Design/methodology/approach – Reflective essaying is first introduced as a unifying concept in the model. Second, the model is introduced and justified especially in connection with De Montaigne's invention of the *essai* as a process of trying out opinions and testing responses. Third, the role of teachers as essaying mentors is discussed. Fourth, mentoring for essaying is examined as a learning transaction which exemplifies Dewey's transactional theory of experience and knowing.

Findings – Reflective essaying is promoted as an important way of letting students try to learn. Reflective mentors should promote student learning through reflective essaying which would encourage students to develop their own criticality.

Practical implications – The paper has implications for both teachers and students. Teachers are urged to become more like mentors and less like didactic instructors. As mentors they should be encouraging students to see academic writing as trying out, as essaying, as experimenting with, and as learning through the ideas and materials they reflect upon.

Originality/value – The paper is original in its approach in that it draws on a wide range of historical and contemporary sources on essaying in order to re-evaluate and resurrect essaying as an experimental process of learning.

Keywords Teaching, Mentoring, Higher education

Paper type Viewpoint

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, 1991, p. 218).

My idea of reflective essaying in higher education may be summarized as the free and serious play of mind on an interesting topic in an attempt to learn. This definition combines four major elements: the concept of academic freedom; the university as a (safe?) place for being free, serious and playful; the use of reflective thinking ("mind") to help us (students and teachers) answer important questions; and the use of the essaying process as an attempt to learn. Reflective essaying is also in this sense an attempt at genuine contagious communication (Dewey, 1991, p. 224). What the school educator in Dewey wanted was the creation of a community of thought and purpose between students and society. But university educators should help students move beyond unreflective socialization towards a more critically reflective stage of individuation in order to become sceptical about the current consensus (Rorty, 1999).



Also, where Dewey believed that a “pure interest in truth coincides with love of the free play of thought” (Dewey, 1991, p. 219), Rorty (1999, p. 117) argued that “if you take care of political, economic, cultural and academic freedom, then truth will take care of itself”. Where Dewey wanted a “community of thought and purpose” to promote a “narrative of freedom and hope” Rorty (1999 pp. 122-3) believed that universities should “remain bastions of academic freedom”. And what better way is there in higher education than by offering students and academics the freedom to write critically reflective essays about the issues which concern the communities and societies in which they live?

In a forthcoming essay (Badley, 2009a) I argue that the university should be the best place for teachers to enact the freedom to speak and write and for students to learn their own ways of speaking and writing. The democratic university should provide as much free space as possible for students and teachers to try to develop their own sense of who they are and what their lives are for. In the rest of this paper I want, first, to introduce and emphasize the idea of reflective essaying as a unifying concept in the overall model. Second, I briefly outline a suggested model of reflective essaying and learning in higher education. Third, I consider the role of university educators as essaying mentors. And fourth, I discuss mentoring for essaying as an important learning transaction.

Reflective essaying as a unifying concept

I use the term “essaying” rather than “essay writing” to emphasize the importance of the essay process rather than the essay form. It is the process of essaying – attempting to communicate knowing and understanding – which I propose as a valuable contribution to learning. Elsewhere I write about why we should also value the essay form (see Badley, 2009b). Indeed essays and essay writing are clearly at the heart of education (see, for example, Warburton, 2006). Further, writing in general is so central to the development of critical thinking in higher education (see Moon, 2008, p. 133) that reflective essaying should be taken more seriously.

Essaying since De Montaigne – who invented the *essai* as a form – has been a process of trying out opinions and of testing responses to different subjects and situations (see Cohen, 1958). De Montaigne never meant his essaying to be exercises in especially skilful composition and development. Instead his ideas and judgements “merely grope their way forward, faltering, tripping, and stumbling” (see De Montaigne, 1580, pp. 47-50). As teachers we should, I think, also encourage students to try out and test their essaying as exercises in groping and stumbling since that is all any of us can seriously (and playfully) expect.

Whilst the essay is usually defined as a short composition on any particular subject (*Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, n.d.) I stress essaying as attempting or trying out an exposition on a topic rather than, say, claiming a final, definitive, analysis. Essaying includes arguing, describing, explaining and narrating and therefore overlaps with the production of articles, criticism, history, letters, reviews and reports (Kostelanetz, 1975). But it is not necessarily the case that essayists simply document what they know before they begin to write since they often discover or construct new thoughts in the course of the essaying process. Indeed reflective essaying is often a matter of interpreting our experiences as we write whilst reflexive essaying is where we interpret our previous reflections in different ways. Both reflectivity and reflexivity still relate to

experience. Reflective or reflexive essayists have to try to convince others that their (serious and playful) reflections are at least plausible.

Also because essayists try to say something useful about a topic they also try to honour “the ideals of clarity, accuracy, and force” (Kostelanetz, 1975, p. 2). They may even follow the classical form, after De Montaigne, in which a subject or thesis, echoing the essay’s title, is announced in the opening paragraph. There then follows a series of paragraphs which provide supporting arguments, illustrations, even digressions and anecdotes, as well as possible objections and refutations. Finally, the opening points are usually reiterated in the final sentences (Kostelanetz, 1975).

However, since De Montaigne, an open-ended approach to essaying has been developed which expresses a more conversational tone. Here “the author’s confusions remain as evident as his conclusions, while the reader must work harder than usual in drawing the necessary linkages and definitions” (Kostelanetz, 1975, p. 4). Many contemporary essayists, perhaps rejecting the academic value of objectivity, “emphasize authorial voice and informal tone” in order to achieve “the lucid, direct, orderly and vivid flow of conversation, which conversation, itself interrupted and half-hearted, seldom attains” (Kostelanetz, 1975, p. 5). Further “what distinguishes the true essayist from the academic scholar is that the latter is enslaved to his circumscribed subject, while the essayist is inclined to let his mind roam free, his remarks typically tending to be more suggestive than exhaustive” (Kostelanetz, 1975, p. 6). The word “essay” implies not only “a liberal outlook” but also “a willingness to experiment” and most essays are written without consciousness of form (Kostelanetz, 1975). Indeed modern essaying may now be regarded as offering as many alternative forms of exposition and presentation as modern conceptual art (see the numerous examples in Kostelanetz, 1975). Further, “even exact scientists are writing with an ease and intimacy of conversational style that a generation ago would have led their scientific brethren to view them with suspicion” (Johnson, 1927, p. 12).

My chief concern here is to regard reflective essaying as a unifying concept in university learning because it encourages writers – both novices and experts – to interpret their experiences as they write. These essayists become critically reflective learners when they “explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations” (Boud *et al.*, 1985, p. 19). Indeed reflection may be summarized as a process of connecting and coordinating existing knowledge with new evidence (see Maclellan, 2004). Reflective essaying is critical reflection when it helps us transform what we already think we know into new knowledge. Reflective essaying allows us, affectively and cognitively, to inquire into our existing knowledge and past experience in order to gain new insights and understanding. Unfortunately, in her study of the academic essay, Maclellan found that “only a few scripts” showed evidence of critical reflection (Maclellan, 2004, p. 87).

Reflective essaying in higher education: a suggested model

In order to learn through writing reflective essays students need to be encouraged to see essaying as a series of inter-connecting processes rather than as a simple linear sequence. Students need to assemble material for their essays especially through reading but that reading also has to be a form of critical reflection where they engage with, deconstruct and critique the material rather than merely accept and reproduce it. Critically reflective reading and de-constructing thereby contribute to reflective

learning. It is not just a reiteration of existing knowledge but a critical and interpretive analysis of that knowledge. Reflective learning through reflective essaying may therefore be seen as the result of processing the complex issues of the material considered (see Moon, 2008, p. 128).

Whilst students/writers are critically selecting and analysing their selected material they are also effectively beginning the process of reflective essaying. This is where they try to construct their arguments in order to convince their actual or imagined audience of the usefulness or value of their approach and of the case they are making. Such essaying as construction is another overlapping episode of reflective learning.

Within and then beyond this episode writers/students are also engaged in further reflection, re-construction and learning as they re-focus on their original material and on their de-constructed material. Re-construction is reflexive revision which is also reflexive re-learning.

Reflective essayists also attempt to share their arguments and ideas with their audience by adapting what they have to say to what they believe or think is their audience's main interest or concern. In this sense reflective essaying is also a form of co-constructing and further re-learning. It is also an attempt to offer the audience a more coherent, more integrated, more organised and even more transformed essay of arguments, ideas and suggestions.

This process of reflective essaying and learning may be summarized as a series of emphases rather than as a set of stages. Each element in the process is itself a set of internal processes with which student-writers, operating effectively, engage in order to progress or even transform their learning. The model as outlined is not a linear sequence. Instead it is intended to emphasize reflective essaying as a series of dynamic, inter-connected yet layered internal processes of reflecting and learning.

The model is based on a Deweyan view of learning from experience. The experience of reading and writing is an attempt to make connections, backwards and forwards (hence the arrows in Figure 1), between the texts read and the writing produced in order to consider the doubts, issues, problems and questions raised. Writing – essaying – then becomes a form of learning by doing, learning by trying, learning by experimenting, in order to set down what writers think they know and understand by the questions posed. Such writing helps writers construct or make “the connections of things”. Each piece of writing becomes an essay, an attempt, a try, to set down a plausible answer to a specific problem. Writers – novices or experts – may even manage to persuade others that their essay is an authentic individual attempt to write something useful about the topic under discussion (see Dewey, 1916; Badley, 2008).

However even though the model emphasizes reflective essaying as learning by trying to make backward and forward connections between reading and writing it still appears to suggest a linear progression from element to element. Instead these elements can also be summarized and put into a more dynamic version. Here the starting point – Doubting and Questioning – is clearly the source of further doubting and questioning as backwards and forwards connections are continuously made amongst the processes of Reflective Reading, Reflective Essaying, Reflexive Reflecting and Reflective Sharing. All these connections are made in, and driven by, the overall attempt at Reflective Learning about the doubts and questions initially addressed. Each reflective essay is an attempt at the resolution of doubt. Whether it is a successful one is a matter for further critical and reflective judgement. The following version of

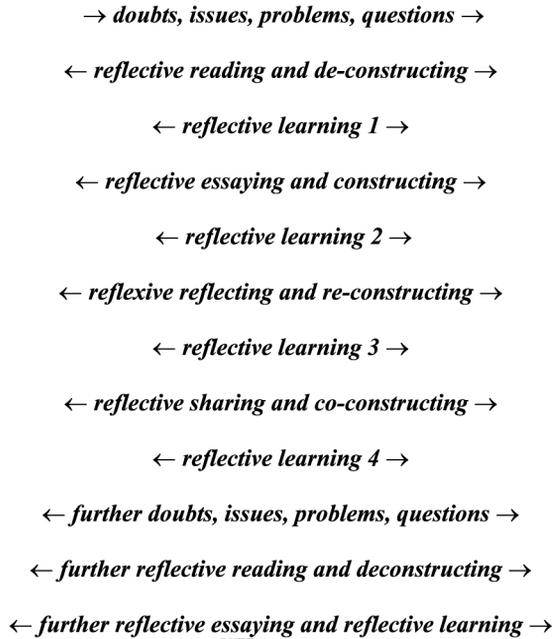


Figure 1.
Reflective essaying and
learning in higher
education: a suggested
model

the model also, however, over-simplifies the complexities of reflective essaying. But then all such models are, necessarily, simplifications of a much more complicated reality (see Figure 2).

Learning through reflective essaying also overlaps with, but has significant differences from, a recently-developed writing process model (see Lavelle and Bushrow, 2007). This focuses on the need for writers to integrate disparate ideas, synthesize perspectives, and extend theory by using strong construction skills and perspective-taking. The writing process model is based on criteria for deep and surface writing. Deep factors include, first, an elaborative factor where writers invest in writing as a tool for personal learning. Second is an intuitive factor where writers seem to visualise what they are writing about or hear themselves whilst writing. A scientific deep factor suggests working to an effective plan with arguments already clear before writing. A fourth deep sculpturing factor outlines a rough draft which is then refined and reshaped. These deep factors emphasize depth of process, elaboration and understanding as effective tools for meaning-making in writing. They contrast with three surface factors – low self-efficacy, lack of revision and task-orientation – which convey a superficial and simplistic understanding of writing and revision processes.

The reflective essaying approach overlaps with the writing process model in that, first, they both emphasize effective construction skills – what I refer to as de-constructing, constructing, re-constructing and co-constructing. Second they both emphasize individual perspective-taking or individual essaying as attempting to write something useful or meaningful about key problems and topics. Essaying always has a personal “as I see it” perspective. It is always about individual perspective-taking. But the two models also differ. The writing process model makes a distinction between

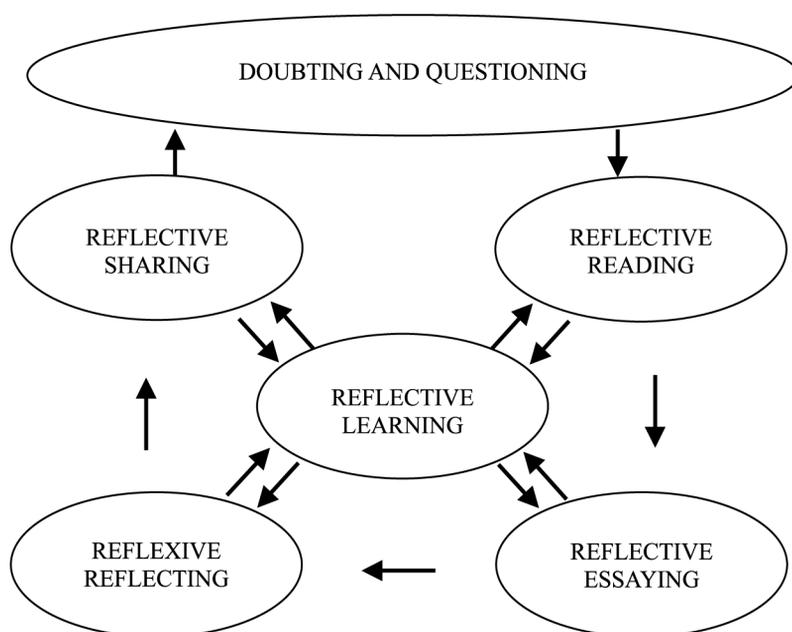


Figure 2.
A reflective essaying
model

deep and surface factors without admitting that such a distinction is somewhat problematical. For example, Webb argues that the deep/surface metaphor is, itself, superficially appealing in its simplicity, universality and power (see Webb, 1997). Dewey would probably have referred to the deep/surface distinction as an unnecessarily stark dualism. Reflective essaying instead emphasizes two important factors neglected in the writing process model: the notion of continuous reflectivity and the interpretation of essaying as attempting to learn by doing and experimenting throughout the writing process. However, I suggest that reflective essaying as reflective learning also includes attempts at integration of new ideas, synthesis of different perspectives and extension of theory.

University teachers as reflective essaying mentors

How can university teachers become effective mentors within a reflective essaying approach to writing? My idea of the reflective essaying mentor here overlaps with Schön's (1987) notion of the reflective practitioner and Barnett's (2007) extension of that model into the critical reflective practitioner. The reflective essaying mentor is, after Schön, a reflective practitioner essayist, a university educator who also essays. The reflective essaying mentor is, after Barnett, a critical reflective practitioner essayist, a university educator who critiques reflective essays and essaying. University educators become effective mentors when they take the reflective process into critical socio-cultural and political domains.

Reflective essaying mentors mainly adopt a Deweyan approach which would be against didactic inculcation and transmission and for "the structuring of experiences and the fostering of conversations that are challenging, problematic, engaging, and horizon stretching" (Kamler and Thomson, 2006, pp. 8-19; Dewey, 1916). Reflective

essaying mentors would create opportunities for students to become essayists and to learn through essaying. Mentors as critical reflective practitioners would model essay writing and would suggest explicit strategies for producing essay texts. Mentors would, like thesis supervisors, focus attention on “specific linguistic choices, their juxtaposition, sequencing, layout, generic and discourse conventions, expectations and modes of address” (Kamler and Thomson, 2006, p. 22). Reflective essaying mentors should also follow the recommendations in the process writing model: “providing students with models, encouraging genre familiarity, and talking about writing, writers’ beliefs, and how it is that academic writing functions at that level as both *a tool of learning and one of communication*” (Lavelle and Bushrow, 2007, p. 12, emphasis added). Mentors could also provide workshops and/or facilitate reading and writing groups to support their essaying students (see Murray and Moore, 2006).

What De Montaigne had to say in his essay “On the art of conversation” readily applies to the value of reading and writing groups. Conversation teaches us to “court” correction and “expose ourselves to it, especially when it comes in the shape of discussion”. Indeed in good company (in reading and writing groups?) expression should be bold and people should say what they think. Such robust discussion shows us that “the active pursuit of truth is our proper business” since “the world is but a school of inquiry” (Murray and Moore, 2006, pp. 292-3). He also offers some useful advice to teachers (and reflective essaying mentors?) who should “make” their students “sift everything” and “take nothing . . . on simple authority or trust” (Murray and Moore, 2006, p. 56). Students should “transform and fuse together” the passages they borrow from others, to make them into their own judgements. Education and study should have “no other aim but to form this” (Murray and Moore, 2006). This is all about “rubbing and polishing our wits on those of others” (Murray and Moore, 2006). Above all students should be taught “to yield to the truth” (Murray and Moore, 2006, p. 60). All of this requires that education be conducted with “a gentle severity” (Murray and Moore, 2006, p. 72). The idea of reflective essaying mentors being gently severe has a certain appeal.

It is clear from what De Montaigne writes that he was a Deweyan before Dewey. He rejects the teacher as didact – the mere inculcator and transmitter of his own ideas. He espouses the idea of conversation in order to challenge and engage students. He wants to encourage students to be essayists who learn to learn through their own attempts at essaying. Teachers as mentors should, instead, regard themselves in their gently severe conversations with students as co-learners rather than as authorities who hinder learning. In this way De Montaigne is also a forerunner of what all modern educational researchers are urged to become:

Educational researchers should now acknowledge that the time has come for them to engage in an unrestricted conversation with the wider educational community – a conversation in which all participants were taken seriously, in which there were no barriers to free and open communication and in which some old certainties would be abandoned and some new questions would be addressed (Carr, 2007, p. 284).

This quotation, emphasizing unrestricted conversation, free and open communication, abandoning of certainties and posing of new questions, could serve as a set of watchwords for all expert or novice reflective essayists. And their mentors.

Mentoring for reflective essaying as an important learning transaction

De Montaigne argued that his essays were attempts to reach an audience for “a speech belongs half to the speaker, half to him who hears it” (De Montaigne, 1580, p. 372). Thus “the hearer should let the form of its delivery prepare him for its reception; as, with tennis players, the man who takes the service shifts his position and makes ready according to the movements of the striker and to the nature of the stroke” (De Montaigne, 1580). Here is De Montaigne saying in the sixteenth century what Bakhtin and Voloshinov asserted in the twentieth: that “word is a two-sided act”. For every text, every essay, is an intended transaction between writer and reader: “the word is oriented towards an addressee . . . and in the absence of the real addressee, an addressee is presupposed” (Voloshinov, 1929, p. 85, and see Iser, 1972). All of this suggests that De Montaigne would have been a model reflective essaying mentor and it also suggests that De Montaigne was a learning transactionalist in advance of Dewey.

Every text, every essay, is an intended transaction between writer and reader: “the word is oriented towards an addressee . . . and in the absence of the real addressee, an addressee is presupposed” (Voloshinov, 1929, p. 85). This orientation towards an addressee or reader is important in that it brings out the two-sidedness or reciprocity of the writing/reading transaction. Another way of putting this is to say that “meaning is realized only in the process of active, responsive understanding” (Voloshinov, 1929, p. 102). It is the two participants or interactants in the transaction who together produce word and meaning. But we are also warned that “the meaning of a word is determined entirely by its context. In fact, there are as many meanings of a word as there are contexts of its usage” (Voloshinov, 1929, p. 79). Or, as Wittgenstein famously put it: “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 20e/43).

All writing, including essaying, is a dialogical process, a joint activity between writers and their presupposed or actual readers. Indeed without dialogue, without a reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, between addresser and addressee, there would be no language and, therefore, no possible transaction between writer and reader. The somewhat cryptic “word is a two-sided act” could, therefore, be re-written as “word is a transaction between writer and reader”.

In this context Dewey’s transactional theory of experience is directly relevant. Dewey rejected such stark dualisms as man and world, inner and outer, self and not-self, subject and object. I imagine he would also have rejected deep and surface. Instead he argued that these so-called dualisms are all “parties in life-transactions” so that, for example, writers, essayists, and readers become parties in the particular life-transaction of making meaning. Just as in his transactional view of knowing there is no radical separation between that which is observed and the individual observer so there is no radical separation between the text, the essay, and the individual reader. The essay and the reader’s interpretation of it are therefore closely connected. The reader comes to participate in the essay through the actual transaction of meaning making. Dewey’s belief in the interconnectedness of knower and known and, by extension, reader and text, undermines positivist assertions of certainty, detachment, passivity and universality (see Connell, 2008 and Dewey and Bentley, 1940). Readers cannot, therefore, claim that their interpretations of any text or any essay are certain and universal since their own personally-driven reading activities could hardly be either detached or passive. Readers are, and have to be, actively engaged as partners, sharers, in the life-transaction called making meaning.

The importance of the mentor's role in promoting and supporting reflective essaying is, therefore, to suggest the usefulness of a transactional approach (or theory) of writing and reading. Reflective essaying is, indeed, always an attempt at transaction and not at transmission. Mentors need to stress the importance of reflective essaying as a co-operative transaction between at least two life-partners – the essay-writer and the essay-reader – in the making of meaning. Mentors should help students move away from the idea of (essay-) reading as receiving fixed meaning from the authoritative (essay-) writer towards a view of joint meaning-making, towards the co-construction of meaning and reflective sharing.

But can or should mentors actually teach reflective essaying? Perhaps reflective mentoring is a quixotic gesture of trying to teach just as reflective essaying is a quixotic gesture of trying to make meaning. Perhaps mentoring for reflective essaying is more of an incidental process which suits reflective learning better than direct teaching (see Baumbach, 1970, pp. 1-2). Perhaps gently severe mentors should just help student essayists find their own voices in order to use essaying for their own discoveries – or rather makings – of meaning.

Reflective essaying: an attempted if tentative conclusion

What I have tried to achieve in this mainly serious but occasionally playful piece is a resurrection of (reflective) essaying as “an attempt in learning and practice”. “Essay” means “the action or process of trying or testing”; “an attempt, endeavour”; “a first attempt in learning or practice – 1734”; “a first draft – 1739”; “a short composition on any particular subject; orig. “an irregular undigested piece” but “now said of a finished treatise – 1597”. “Essayist” came into the language in 1609 meaning “one who makes trials or experiments. *Now rare. 1736*”. Currently an essayist is simply “a writer of essays” but Dr Johnson did not like the breed: “Meere Essaists! A few loose sentences, and that's all” (*Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, n.d.). But, despite Dr Johnson, I want to promote (de-rarify) essayists as trialists and essaying as reflective experimenting, as reflective learning by doing, as reflective learning through writing more than “a few loose sentences”.

“Essay” is clearly a phenomenological term: it encourages essayists to express their own perspectives on, and approaches to, the world (see Marton *et al.*, 1984) whether or not these are judged (provocatively?) as surface (“undigested”?) or deep-meaning (“finished”?). Through writing or reading essays we bring our own phenomenological differences to our approaches to learning. As readers we should not try to discern the meaning and message of an essay. Instead we should read every essay, every text, as another's attempt to persuade us of an argument or a case with its own “interpretive stance” (Bruner, 2002, p. ix) to which we should bring our own “counter-stance”. In this way essays are two-sided attempts at meaning. Every word in every essay is a two-sided act and is part of a reciprocal relationship between essayist and reader. Good essayists know that they write from their own interpretive stance and that they are and should be read from the critical counter-stances of others. This two-sided reflective scepticism means that essayists and their readers should continuously develop their own critical stances and voices, their own critical beings and move towards their own critical action (see Barnett, 2007). De Montaigne's own innovative essaying demonstrated such a sceptical and Socratic approach.

The model of reflective essaying proposed and exemplified in this article, attempt, composition, endeavour, essay, experiment, piece, treatise or trial is provisional and

tentative. It could not be otherwise given my belief in reflective essaying as a free and serious play of mind upon a topic in order to learn. I have attempted to set down what I think I have learned about essaying whilst trying to connect this provisional learning with what others have had to say. But, overall, I want to promote reflective essaying as an important way of letting students try to learn. Reflective mentors let their students learn through their reflective essaying: reflective essaying is students learning by having a go (see Barnett, 2007). Also reflective essaying frees space for students to develop their criticality through their reflective and reflexive learning. Finally, whether the model is useful to others – mentors and students – is for their own critical reflection and judgment. The reflective process of essaying leads to the reflective process of assaying.

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Corresponding author

Graham Badley can be contacted at: graham.badley@anglia.ac.uk