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Culminating Critical Reflection

In the modern era where everyone is connected by the simple touch of a screen, the value of efficient communication has become truly priceless. Yet English majors have grown familiar with the questioning reactions that seem to come right behind explaining what pursuit they have invested their time and money into. But coming from an indecisive writer with two years of attempted business courses under my belt, I can say with all certainty that it wasn't until I took a leap of faith into following my passions that I actually felt prepared for the next jump into the real world. It is difficult to choose just a few experiences from the variety of courses in my undergraduate studies because they have each contributed so heavily to the confidence I have now towards using it all to chase *my* idea of success: making a significant positive impact with the time I have been given on this earth. The moment I realized how far a degree in Writing and Rhetoric could reach, how easily it could open a plethora of career paths, I knew it would get me where I wanted to go no matter what the numbers were on payday.

This past year I was fortunate enough to knock out the required Experiential Learning course a little earlier than most, as it is usually one of the last courses many students take. From January 2016 to May 2016 I completed an internship with the Gwinnett Daily Post; which is a newspaper for a local county in Georgia that runs in print still and online. Daniel Vollaro, the instructor for the course, connected me to Todd Cline, the Post's editor in chief. I was called in

to interview for the position to intern and pretty much solidified my spot on the team by the end of that interview. After a background check I was introduced to Katie Morris and started spending an average of ten to twelve hours a week working on assignments and tasks under her instruction. During my first week Katie introduced me to the Post's software and walked me through the regular duties I would be performing over the course of the internship. I started out with smaller projects such as updating the music and art venue pages as well as college and military announcements. Katie then allocated specific pieces for me to write on local happenings, such as a local elderly couple celebrating seventy-one years of marriage. To write these I was given notes on what was important and put my story together from there. By the end of my internship I had conducted on-site interviews at La Madeleine in Buford and Mavericks Cantina in Johns Creek with the restaurant owners in order to write pieces on the atmosphere and pricing of their business. In addition I was given professional camera equipment and training in order to take the photographs for these pieces, and when I did the second review the upcoming summer intern shadowed me so that I would be able to show her how the process worked. Overall I ended up with six bylines that remain accessible through the Gwinnett Daily Post website, and Todd received personal emails in regards to two of them that were greatly appreciative for what I had written.

This internship definitely aligns with personal growth above all else. I have always felt a pull towards journalism; even as a child I made up "The Family Newspaper" that I would regularly create on printer paper making lines with a ruler for the title and "articles" so that I could update my parents on happenings around the house and our little neighborhood. The assignment of writing pieces outside an academic setting was instantly fulfilling; it was the first time doing a "job" was so enjoyable that it not once felt like work. I absolutely loved writing

lifestyle pieces because of the light-heartedness attached to them, but after this experience I could tell a career in journalism would only be for me if I was afforded the opportunity to tackle more serious stuff in a way that would let me express my opinions. My one-on-one interviews with the restaurant owners, to me, strongly reiterated my confidence in being able to approach others in a way that they feel comfortable; as if we have spoken numerous times before. However, I know I would immediately reroute myself on this path if it lead to sacrificing even an ounce of my integrity.

After my internship I was able to do a summer semester for the first time over the course of May 2016 to July 2016. I piled on three classes despite the recommended two, and one of these was a creative writing workshop introduction. I enjoyed it so much that I subsequently registered for the special fiction workshop for fall semester. For these experiences there was just as much if not more involvement with my fellow classmates as with the instructors. His-Ling Huang's intro class included four separate writing assignments: a five plus page personal essay, a poetry submission including three poems, a five plus page short story strictly contemporary, and a ten minute play. For the short story and the play we participated in full-class workshops where each student was required to print enough copies of their piece so that everyone else in the class had an anonymous version. We were assigned to critique the pieces with notes outside of class before coming together in a circle during class time to openly discuss works without the author's input or questioning until the very end. In this way, each student received not only feedback from a professional (the instructor), but also got to keep the feedback attached to each copy that was given to their peers as well. Brigitte Hoarau's fiction workshop class included four short stories that each required putting to practice various techniques with allowance to go beyond contemporary fiction into genre fiction. These assignments included a one-scene narrative that

incorporated a flashback sequence alongside first person point of view, another single-scene piece using a third person point of view, a piece from any point of view but with at least two scenes, and finally a short story project that could be any point of view but required multiple scenes and at least eight pages or more. The first assignment was reviewed only by the instructor; who provided plenty of feedback through the D2L online program. The second two short story assignments were workshopped in a more private, online setting with smaller groups of four to five students. These smaller workshops required each group member to post their story to a discussion board and then students wrote at least a half to a full page critique for each person in their group before coming together during the following class time to discuss these critiques face to face. These peer reviews included insights on proper use of point of view, setting, themes, overall structure and transitions, etc. The final piece was a full class workshop, however unlike the intro workshops the pieces up for critique had their authors attached to them the entire time. In a similar fashion students were required to write critiques for all of their classmate's final pieces before coming together to discuss as a class.

My experiences with creative writing workshops fall under both personal growth and academic enhancement. My greatest point of growth here was learning how to better take a step back from my work and opinions of it and fully invest in listening to the feedback received from instructors and peers. Fully listening and letting go of desire to defend was definitely a challenge, but probably the one challenge I appreciated most because in reviews of these works to my most recent ones the improvement is not only obvious, but inspiring. So much so that I no longer feel a weight of anxiety over letting others critique my work now; I want the feedback no matter what because I know it is essential to my growth and success as a writer. Academic enhancement is clear in this way as well; I would not have reached this level of confidence without the time

spent learning to better understand the approaches behind writing worthwhile fiction. In studying these approaches, it is easier to see that this is one of those things in which knowledge on it must be sought after consistently in order to be the best. Those who make it with what they write more often than not have a natural talent, sure, but they have also put in the effort it takes to better understand the abundance of techniques and approaches to literature and communication in an all-encompassing sense.

Perhaps one of my favorite and most inspiring projects I completed over my undergraduate studies was in the Writing and Digital Media course taught by Scott Reed during fall semester 2016. This course broke down one final multimodal project into steps of planning and execution throughout the semester; including continuous feedback from the instructor and peer reviews with a classmate on the steps taken towards completion. The topic of this project was completely up to us and so I decided to do mine on the existence of systematic oppression and its tangible consequences. The result: a semester spent researching this topic in order to provide at least eight scholarly sources to support what became a forty-minute video podcast pilot and what is now a Youtube channel that I have updated since and hope to continue to do so on a more regular basis. I titled my segments “Final Facts” as they were originally created in rebuttal to ex-Blaze news personality Tomi Lahren’s “Final Thoughts”. This project reached beyond words on a page and into the digital aspect that makes widespread communication possible and even more powerful. I was able to check out equipment from the Georgia Gwinnett media lab, made my own green screen, and had one close friend step in as my entire IT crew for filming and editing. Although I personally wrote the entire script, I did create a makeshift teleprompter using a large monitor and Microsoft Word. Additionally I created slideshow visuals through Google Drive that were later edited into the video, and another good friend created an

intro visual for me in his free time that really helped give the podcast a more professional feel. I received a near perfect score for this project and Scott Reed provided incredible feedback on where to take my ideas and abilities next.

Although I do see personal growth from this experience in the fact that it was my first time diving into such a complicated project, actually writing the script and “performing” it came naturally to me. I love public speaking; when I have done my research on what I am saying my confidence to say it can’t be touched. Because of the direction I hope to take “Final Facts” towards I would more so classify this undergraduate experience under civic learning. Prior to Scott Reed’s course I had taken over a year’s worth of African American literature-based classes, and although I already had a passion hinging on social-justice-warrior status this increased that passion to life goal levels. It is obvious now that the best and truly only approach that people must take to generate progressive enough change is to never stop seeking knowledge on anything surrounding any issue of injustice. After all the time I spent researching facts and data surrounding systematic oppression I couldn’t help but realize that if the courses on African American history that I was given the opportunity to take were included in a core curriculum at all levels of education rather than an elective, we would witness noticeable, rapid progress. However, it is also true that strong ignorance can build a wall that takes insurmountable efforts to break down. For me gaining the knowledge to overcome this is fulfilling enough to again make it seem like something I want to do and not just work. But by that same token I have room for improvement in ensuring that I engage with opposing views in the most civil manor possible. I recognize the power to do this lies in the depth of my knowledge on whatever injustice I am discussing or debating.

Between these three key experiences all course outcomes attached to an English degree have been not only met, but in my opinion exceeded. My internship at the Gwinnett Daily Post and my video podcast pilot “Final Facts” enhanced my skills in the sense that I got to dabble in the media aspect of communication. My pilot additionally exemplified this outcome through its relation to culture within American society. Both creative writing workshops enhanced my abilities in the sense of understanding critical and theoretical approaches to writing literature, as well as provided several chances to read, interpret, and evaluate texts through critiquing the work of my peers. Finally, and additionally, the “Final Facts” pilot effectively demonstrated proficiency in research and scholarly methods as well as aiding in my ability to engage with, understand, and support the relevance of literature, art, and textual study within a globally diverse community.