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ENG Capstone

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Capstone Portfolio Analysis

After 11 years out of a college classroom, I knew there would be a few growing pains readjusting to college life. I graduated from Utah Valley University in 2008 with a Creative Writing degree in English. Since then, I have had the opportunity to do just about every type of writing, presenting, and educating as part of my book series and more. While I loved every moment of it, the more time that passed from the day I stepped out of UVU for the last time, the more I knew there was something still waiting for me on the horizon, that something was missing from my life. That missing piece of my life was the opportunity to teach. While my book series presented me with the opportunity to teach at book signings, author events, and even expos like Salt Lake Comic-Con, those were isolated experiences, not regularly scheduled responsibilities. But in obtaining a Master's, gates would open that lead to a path I wished to travel, eventually reaching destinations that would feel familiar and exciting. And the classes and material covered during the program will provide the foundation upon which I can build my future.

Overview

During my English Studies program, I created more than 195 individual files, documents, and projects, writing no fewer than 51 unique essays, research papers, proposals, and tests. That is a lot of material to sift through in a short analysis. While each assignment tested my abilities and provided something of value, there were a few specific assignments that change my perceptions more than others. I will take a quick look at three of the most important assignments and give an overview of what made each unique.

ENG 507

ENG 507 was a class focused on methods and issues in teaching reading and writing composition, specifically focusing on K-12 students and children. Besides the usual discussion posts on YellowDig, our

primary focus for the class was creating a four-week lesson plan for a theoretical classroom. Most smaller assignments were one-week pieces of the overall month plan, with the final paper combining and synthesizing them.

During the class, we also had to select a book focused on teaching children to write. I selected “Joy Write”, a book that, as the title suggests, shows ways to get kids excited about reading and writing. In conjunction with reading the book, we were tasked with creating an infographic that highlighted the major points of the book. It was at this moment that my borderline unhealthy love of infographics was born (or at least realized).

As for the lesson plan for the students, I decided that the best course of action would be to have my theoretical classroom build a website. After high school and as I began college, I had to develop my own website and content to go along with my book. I started with almost no knowledge and had to teach myself everything from how a website is hosted to designing banners and backgrounds. The skills and abilities I acquired during that time have served me ever since, as I had to learn a plethora of writing abilities, from catchy headlines and titles to succinct social media posts. What better way to get kids into writing and learn a variety of skills than to build a website and do all the work associated with it? This activity would expose children to almost every type of writing in one complete package. Here is an excerpt from the plan:

The weekly plans will cover the following topics and lessons: 1. Voting for a topic based on a skill or hobby, piece of media, or historical event, a free-write note taking assignment, and an idea proposal. It will also include the instructional time for learning about the parts of a website. This week will also see students pre-write about the selected topic and engage in a workshopping activity to discuss their writing and ideas. 2. Students will learn the basics of research and complete the articles they began in week one. They will also write a brief literature review and spend class time in the library and computer lab researching their topics. 3. Students will Learn about headlines, flavor text, and social media. They will work as groups to create titles and headlines for the website. 4. The final week will involve design and layout of the website, with students selecting fonts and layout options. This will also include the final presentation. While a website might seem unorthodox and complicated, the idea is simple and elegant—it provides students a huge variety of real-world writing opportunities and covers almost all genres and types of writing, from brief social media posts to researched articles aimed at a specific audience and demographic. It will also provide opportunities for working individually and in groups, for workshops, and for greenbelt and feral writing alongside formal requirements.

Reading and writing are enjoyable when they are not viewed as chores or limited in scope; if a student treats writing as a thing only done as a research paper in a classroom setting (one that includes the typical intro, three-

paragraph body, and conclusion format) they will inevitably hate reading and writing and see the craft as strict, limiting, and boring. But if you show students the variety of what counts as writing it can change their perception and lives forever. Thus, having students select a topic that interests them, creating a website will teach them how to research information, cite sources, write headlines, compose social media messages for a given audience, compose informative but entertaining articles, and use technology to do it all. As it was for me, so it would be for them—possibly the most experience-rich way of learning writing and finding out how fun it can be. And perhaps best of all, it’s a project that can be easily shared through social media (which not only adds more social media writing experiences but will appeal to the Social Media Generation).

ENG 556

ENG 556 was like 507—it was a look at general theories of literacy. But where 507 focused on encouraging children and students to find a love for writing and reading, this class emphasized the theory side of what reading, writing, and literacy mean.

Assignments in the class were geared towards looking at real-world examples of what literacy means in various settings, difficulties that arise from being literate or illiterate in a certain area (technologically, for example), and how literacy changes locally and globally.

When I began writing a novel back in 2005, my goal was to change the way the relationship between an author and readers was perceived. By using an interactive website, I sought to create an environment where readers could, in effect, become parts of the book world itself and even change the outcome of the story through their interactions. This was in many ways an exercise in changing the definition of literacy and literature. So when the course began to focus on the variety of literacies found throughout the world, I felt like the content immediately connected to all the work I had done before.

This class was perhaps my favorite and led to my single favorite essay of the entire English Studies program. The paper was titled “The Biology of Literacy”. In the paper, I compare biological evolution to the evolution of literacy and language. Much like Darwinian theories of evolution, I proposed that language shares many similarities with living organisms and can be born, grow, develop, reproduce, and die according to internal

and external stimuli. Here is a small selection from the paper that illustrates the connection between organisms and language:

Language and literacy then are connected to social and cultural contexts in a stepped or hierarchical manner, as with biological taxonomy. I don't begin to presume to know enough to list specific dialects, mannerisms, linguistic styles, and languages to give more concrete examples, but it is possible to make some simple illustrations. Using the biological classification terms for language, you can connect various social and cultural literacies to common linguistic ancestors before they broke away and specialized, just as biology does. American standard English could be considered a phylum of language—it's not the topmost as it shares its roots in French, Roman, and other older languages—with website content technical writing being a family of writing under the phylum of American standard (with further genus and species classifications for things like how-to manuals or coding languages). 'Westcoast teenage girls texting' could be a technical species of communication isolated to a specific region and with distinct characteristics, much like the distinct species found on isolated but relatively near islands in the ocean. Black English in Harlem could be a specific species of the genus Black Turkington 7 English, just as Black English in the Bronx would be a distinct species but still within the genus of Black English which itself is part of the phylum of American standard. Just like life, conflicts between species can eliminate or change the defeated species, or in this case literacy. Using Dwayne Lowery's example from the Street study, Lowery's literacy of face-to-face "make a deal" communication was almost entirely eradicated by the invasive species that was legal jargon and the legal document. Referring to Lowery's example Street says "These are the arenas in which the worth of existing literate skills become degraded," (176). The genus of "legalistic" literacy colonized a new habitat and decimated the local linguistic species Lowery was familiar with, replacing it with a variety of new species based on the genus of legalistic.

Before this class, I naively assumed that being literate was a black and white/right and wrong/yes or no binary, and that there was only one literacy. If you could read and write, you were literate. But from the first week's material, it was obvious that literacy was not a single thing, but a fluid, dynamic, varied, and robust term to describe a functional ability in a given method of communication. That realization hit me hard then and has stuck with me now. And, undoubtedly, it will stay with me for years to come. This single fact—the diversity of literacy—is my driving force and motivation in teaching English, and will work in tandem with my desire to teach creative writing. Understanding literacy in a broader context doesn't just help people write; it helps people become more balanced, understanding, and capable people in every area of their lives.

LIN 510

Linguistics was another standout class. Given that I wished to rewrite the connection between a writer and a reader earlier in my life, understanding the basics of what language is felt like a missing piece of a puzzle I had been trying to complete for years.

The class began with the fundamentals of language. As in, the very, *very* basics. We looked at the smallest packets of sound or meaning in language and saw how human mouths made the simplest sounds. It was fascinating to learn how human languages are constructed from a functional perspective, meaning how different cultures use their mouths and throats in different ways to create similar sounds but with varying meanings. This quick overview simultaneously enlarged and shrunk my perception of global languages. It enlarged my perception by showing that there are sounds and methods of combining sound I had never really heard or considered that many languages use. But it also showed that, for all the diversity of language in the world, a few simple movements with the mouth, tongue, throat, and nose comprise the entirety of human communication (excluding signed languages). Speaking of signed languages, we also discussed various world sign languages and showed how they share the same structure and sets of rules that govern spoken languages, which was a fascinating revelation (and this coming from someone who took ASL during my undergraduate studies).

The course covered a huge variety of material in a few short weeks. If I could have extended any class in the program, it would have been this one. The information was so fascinating but complicated that, by the time I felt like I was 'getting' the material, we were moving on. But by the end of the course, I did feel familiar with the material enough to discuss linguistic principles naturally. Here is a small selection from the final test:

The North: One major feature of Northern dialects is the rotation of vowel space, which includes low and mid vowels. æ α ɔ for example, pronounced farther back and lower in the mouth than throughout the rest of US dialects. According to chapter 10, this is known as the Northern Cities Shift. Another feature of Northern dialects is the word 'with' used without an object noun phrase. An example of this is 'are you coming with?'. Finally, the 'needs+verb+ing statements. The car needs washing is used instead of the car needs to be washed.

The South: One feature of The South is that most speakers use glides after the vowels ε ɪ to create diphthongs instead of monophthongs. This makes words like 'net' more like nɛɪt. Another feature of the dialect is frequent use of the word 'fixin' to show intent to do something in the future "I'm fixin' to go fishing". Southern speakers also use double modal politeness, which means saying something like 'might could' or 'might should'.

Reflection

While the three courses mentioned above were highlights of the program, every course provided unique challenges. And though some of my favorite and best courses came early in the program (such as ENG 507), I have been refining my techniques of learning, communicating, and writing even to this day.

One of the most important lessons I learned in the program (outside of the course materials themselves) is to not panic and feel overwhelmed. I have been diagnosed with several mental disorders that lead me to feel tremendous anxiety over even the simplest things and to get overwhelmed easily. My worldview is one of looking at the whole and feeling every step in a process all at once, effectively shutting me down. The program was online and usually self-paced. While modules moved one week at a time, for the most part, I, and other students, had free access to the entirety of a course's material from day-one. For someone with a tendency to become overwhelmed easily, this freedom can become more of a burden than a boon.

While most of my post-high school career involved keeping *my* schedule and deadlines as opposed to those set by others, most of my self-imposed deadlines were, well, self-imposed. But more importantly, most deadlines were far off, and the tasks were more individualized. For example, specific editing tasks for my book usually involved a few months of work, and the task was simple (conceptually)—I had to go line by line to do a final readthrough. Laborious, for sure. But it was a very simple task. The process for designing my comic series or book cover was also less overwhelming. For the cover, I began designing it while writing the book. Once I had the basic design drawn all I had to do was hand it over to my illustrator.

While that oversimplifies some of the work involved with my writing in general, it shows that the process was manageable. But jumping into my graduate program brought new systems to learn, new material to cover, regular and rapid deadlines, along with the actual work.

I won't say that I went from zero to 100 throughout the program. I wasn't a comatose mess the first day (though I was very anxious) and I didn't move into the Capstone free of any concern, but progress was made. In every course, I learned a bit more about how to scan a syllabus, look over every module's requirements, and schedule what I would do and when prioritizing weekly tasks while using the latter half of a week to compose larger assignments (such as this summary). After the winter break and moving into French, my mentality and confidence were vastly improved compared to a year prior. I want to attribute some of this to Covid. Not that it was a good thing by any stretch. But the forced time indoors and lack of anything to do beyond riding my bike meant it was easier to devote my time early in the program to understanding how the system worked. So by the time the one-year mark arrived I had developed habits that made the second major segment of the program much

easier than the first. I don't have hard metrics to cite, but I know my sleep quality, mood, and relationship with my family were noticeably improved during the first week of each class. And I count that as a victory.

Conclusion

During my undergraduate programs, I felt like most of what I learned was *how* to learn, not so much about the actual material. Many factors led to that, one of the biggest being general courses that weren't related to my interests. But with my graduate program, I felt like I was both learning how to learn (see the end of the above paragraph), but the information was much more focused, thorough, and interesting. Not only did the process of the English Studies program help me learn more organizational strategies, but the raw information was almost universally useful and extremely interesting and served as inspiration and guidance for my future teaching goals.

During my undergraduate studies, I struggled to focus, learn, and apply myself. I tried to learn in the face of a nameless adversity. It wasn't until after graduation that I was finally diagnosed with several disorders that made it difficult to learn and study. Now, coming into this program at the beginning of 2020, I knew what to expect of myself and was equipped to not only handle the workload but excel. The graduate program became an exercise in understanding how to learn with the information I now had about myself, and applying strategies that were ultimately very successful (I did make it through 2020 after all). After graduation, I am going to turn my attention towards teaching. I want to teach writing at the college level and help inspire students to find a passion for writing, in the same way, I found mine during college. Not only will I continue writing my book series, but now I have the chance to share my enthusiasm almost every day. And for that, this program has been invaluable.