



“What Are You Going To Do With That Degree?” A Case Study in Diverse Purposes for English Capstone Reflections

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ABSTRACT: Programmatic Capstone experiences ask students to synthesize their undergraduate coursework with their real-world aspirations. Towards this end, capstone professors routinely assign a “reflection” (Schon) that contextualizes undergraduate purposes and audiences. Early reflection drafts by students almost always attributes long lists of glowing generalities and familiar platitudes about “the sage(s) on the stage” professor, or a transformative class. This E450 English Capstone case study captures four seniors as they discuss their evolving understanding of “critical reflection”; that is, an examination about the locus of academic power (Šarić & Šteh). E450 English “critical reflection” assignment asks students to *reflect critically* on their own growth while taking ownership of their collegial experiences and future learning.



Cynthia Scott Historical Research

“Philatelic Material in a Literary Study: Samuel Clemens and Bret Harte in the West”

While reflecting upon the learning experiences of my academic career and reviewing past writing assignments, I realize how much those exercises helped me to improve critical thinking skills. For example, learning about the fine points of deep reading made me realize that one should never assume that the first impression of a passage is correct. Also, when analyzing literature and writing essays I must produce more than a summary; I must explicate what I think the author means and why.

My university education has exposed me to wider and deeper views of the world, opening my mind to different ways of offering writing skills to help others, whether for church projects or to support humanitarian causes overseas. A renewed push to publish also has me writing educational, informative philatelic articles for fellow stamp collectors.

To cap off my years of study for an English BA, I revised a 2011 writing project originating in a course on creative nonfiction. The article is a biographical piece about the period (1854-1868) during which authors Mark Twain and Bret Harte began their writing careers in California. I made the story relevant for philatelists by including 42 illustrations of my collected postcards, First Day Covers, and other related postal material about the topic.

Philatelic publication guidelines acquainted me with professional style standards, digital file requirements, and the captioning process. I submitted the article in mid-February 2022 to the *American Philatelist* (AP), the journal of the American Philatelist Society.

First paragraph of article and selected figures:

Philatelic Material in a Literary Study: Samuel Clemens and Bret Harte in the West

I have long been fascinated by the relationship between two famous authors (together in Figure 1) whose paths crossed in California following the 1849 gold rush there. Academic study reveals their various jobs, their first impressions of each other, changes in their writing, how they worked together as friends, and finally—the story behind their falling out.

Fig. 1— John Coulthard (1903-1966) made linoleum-stamp cachets for many California Motherlode towns like Twain-Harte.



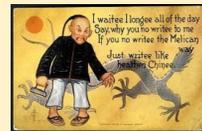
Fig. 2--\$5 Bret Harte stamp August 25, 1987, of the Great American series.

Fig. 7-- February 13, 1940, 10-cent stamp honoring Samuel Clemens, Famous Americans series.



Fig. 10-- In 1986, artist Judith Fogt added this one-of-a-kind cachet to a 1960 envelope with Pony Express embossed.

Fig. 39-- A 1911 postcard showing biases against Chinese more than 40 years after Harte's satire “Ah Sin.”



Christian Litsey Relationship Growth

“Temptations”
a Short Story

Entering the Capstone course for my English degree, I was certain that it would be a necessary but largely ceremonial look into the slow building of a degree where the goal of the whole process was to simply achieve a better job than I would have otherwise. However, as I reflect on my experiences in school, the Capstone course has come to mean a little more. Working on my poetry for this course has illuminated the importance of my growth as a lover of creative writing.

Beyond illuminating the advancement in my writing skills, the Capstone has renewed my interest in literature. I always enjoyed reading, but my time obtaining an English degree has shown me how literature can be used to better understand the world around me and those who share it with me.

The Capstone enables me to truly understand my growth as an English Major, from a fright millennial unsure of his abilities into a graduate that is confident in his love of reading and writing.

A passage from “Temptations:”

Angelica wanted to murder the man she had trusted for 15 years as she took stock of her years of marriage in frantic reflection thinking back on her years of absolute devotion to their family and the choices that led them to this clumsy, uncomfortable, and convoluted conversation in this mid-tier, overpriced, uninspired, tacky resort on this Pacific hellhole.

Through my writing and editing efforts, old poems that were far from finished became more impactful in their literately force. I've gone from someone who did not trust their abilities in writing to someone who has been published and who has a personal passion for writing. When I am asked to examine my works through a lens carefully crafted in years of academic advancement, *poetry* especially stands out to me.

Here is a sample poem →

The Boys

Hanging with the boys,
Tossing some back,
Laughing about life,
Ignoring certain realities that shade us.

Like:
“Why can't we talk about feelings?”
And
“How is everyone doing in our romantic relationships?”
Or
“Is anyone else having anxiety about work right now?”

Nope.

We just sit back, swallow the sour beer,

Flip the channel to the next game.

Talk about another woman foolish enough to sleep with us losers.

Ignore how we're all dying inside because being a “man” sucks.



Ethan Montgomery Pandemic Coming-of-Age

“Memento Te Ipsum”
a Short Story

Unlike other classes I had in college, the E450 English Capstone required that I create my individualized meaning. I had no idea what a capstone was, or how it would contribute to my English bachelor's degree. I was asked to reflect on my past accomplishments and future goals, but initially I still wanted a comfortable class structure. Eventually I learned to think differently about my undergraduate experience and where it will lead me. For me, the Capstone made me change my perspective on these three purposes.

The capstone has changed my perspective on what a class can entail. Before classes were mainly about teaching materials from a set syllabus. The capstone is an exploratory experience, rather than just content based. My path can be molded in the way that best benefit my learning, as well as my fiction writing goals.

The capstone also changed how I thought about my learning. I saw most of my classes as steppingstones on a path to a career; we absorb the materials and move on. But the capstone has shown me that we learn more than just the materials in the class; we also learn more about ourselves and how to learn. We are always changing, and it might take just one class for us to think in a whole new way, maybe even make changes in careers.

Lastly, the capstone changed how I think about teaching. I have considered a job in teaching even before I had taken this class. In a regular classroom all students are taught in the same way, all together, and are tested in a similar manner. Reflecting on how and I learned all these years reenergized my view of what I could accomplish in teaching. I want my [prospective] students to be more reflective about their learning when I am a teacher so that I can teach self-awareness through critical reflection.

Here is a passage from my short story about a teen surviving a natural disaster and serving on a rescue team:

“Memento Te Ipsum”

Rescue Mission Day 1- 9:21 AM.

Faith stirs from her slumber like any other day down in the bunker. The quiet this bunker's walls provide make for peaceful sleep. That is until she remembers she was assigned to a mission last night. She was to report to debriefing in about ten minutes from now. That wakes her right up. As much as Faith loves her bed, that love could never compare to her eagerness to tackle a new Phoenix mission.

*“Memento Te Ipsum =
“Remember Yourself”*



Dalton Ferguson Young Adult Romance

“Nightmare on Norris Road”
a Short Story

Before taking the English Capstone E450, I had given little thought to my future. I simply assumed that I would become a high school English teacher. But when I began to think about what I wanted in a job, I knew I would not enjoy being in a classroom all day. I would feel caged, though I understand others thrive in a classroom. Upon reflection as assigned in the Capstone, I do not think that working in classroom is best for me.

I want to be able to write and do the things I love in an environment that makes me feel comfortable. An exciting idea is taking hold; I now think about writing for a newspaper or a career in journalism with an eye to the sports and video game world!

I already love to make Tik Tok sports content by looking at historic games that helped changed the NFL. Along that line, I am in the process of starting a sports-related blog with my friend.

We are setting up the blog to review recently released video games. If our first blog gets on its feet, and we can gain viewers and sponsors, we might make a different blog relating to world sports and USA sports--mainly football.

I want to be able to work on my terms and be able to work with ideas and topics that are my favorite things in the world. If I had not been asked to reflect on my goals, I am not sure I would have thought about my strengths and preferences in this way.

Here is a passage from my short story:

At the end of Norris Road there sits a house that is not like the rest on the road. The rest of the homes are cookie cutter family houses. This house is old, dilapidated, and as far from welcoming as possible. The difference between the houses is jarring, not only in appearances from the rest of the street. In this house lives a young couple that could not afford one of those beautiful homes down the road. They know that people look down on their house, but they are proud because it is their home. What they don't know is the true history of this house they are living in.

The young couple that lives in the rundown house are named Chris and Angela. They both look around their rundown house....

Later, that night while Angela is cooking dinner there is a knock at the door. Chris looks at Angela asking if she had invited any of the neighbors over. Angela says “No, but please answer the door it; might be something important.” Chris slowly cracks open the door to see police officer with a look of concern on his face. The officer tells Chris a neighbor's wife has gone missing. He is alerting everyone on the road and asking questions about the missing person. Angela and Chris look at each other, both are thinking about the strange kid they saw earlier in the day; but they both shake their heads “No” and say that they have seen nothing out of the ordinary.

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