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23 February 2022

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ENG-G 540 Capstone

Capstone Reflection

The oft-said adage “You don’t know what you don’t know” is popular because it is so true. I came to IUPUC with 150 transfer credits accumulated from several colleges over a span of four decades but had not yet completed a four-year degree. I felt that my writing skills were well developed before coming here but I still had to learn what I didn’t know.

During my time here I have been exposed to many writing purposes and genres but did not take the writing classes on poetry or fiction because I have never felt creatively driven to express myself those ways. Even so, I ended up learning something about them through material studied in other English courses. Those other English courses covered creative nonfiction, literature, editing, business writing, and writing for the web. History, anthropology, folklore, and psychology also required compositions.

By far, the most motivating course for me was Creative Nonfiction (ENG-W 305), taught by Dr. Lewis (Terry) Dibble. I learned that nonfiction does not have to be dry, passive, and filled only with facts. As mentioned in the syllabus, it can be “‘Distinguished from the formal essay by its friendly, conversational tone, its drive toward candor and confession, and its often quirky, first-person voice” and can focus on “the minutiae of daily life—fashions, rituals, vanities, family life, romantic foibles, ...and the great social and political issues of the day.” In this class we were encouraged to experiment with perspectives and voices, and to fill in blanks where facts are not known with imaginative scenarios. This approach helped me write two memoir-style pieces—one about my grandfather performing in vaudeville and the other about my mother attaining her general contractor’s license to build custom homes.

A related higher-level course, ENG-W 313 The Art of Fact, is the one where I first wrote about two fascinating authors Mark Twain and Bret Harte. Classmates shared feedback on the various drafts and encouraged me to include more creative elements and richer detail to answer questions readers might have. The nature of the story led me to speak of my two characters as Sam and Frank. In this course, I also sharpened interviewing skills to write a profile about one of our adjunct professors, Mohammed Sirajuddin Ansari. He is a fascinating person with a rich background in folklore from India.

Of six literature courses taken, two were most impactful in helping me to dig deeper for meaning and understanding of difficult material. Dr. Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick taught me how to explicate when analyzing a passage, that is, say everything I have observed and know about it without assuming that the meaning is obvious. I began developing that skill when studying “Tess of the D'Urbervilles” by Thomas Hardy and pieces of Gertrude Stein’s modernist writings in the literature introductory course ENG-L 202.

In ENG-L 354, American Literature III, we explored modernist, contemporary, and post-modernist writers since 1914. These writers were often concerned about current social issues not previously approached during the earlier era. They spoke out (via their writing) on civil rights, gender, labor, minority cultures, and taboo subjects like sex, drugs, and suicide. The writing was often styled as confessional poetry, personal political prose, or memoirs. For my two project papers, I dug into Carl Sandberg and Toni Morrison.

In ENG-L 378, Studies in Women and Literature, the focus was on the feminist movement. We were guided to ask about the significance of the author being female, and what was being contested or reaffirmed in terms of these elements: gender, literary merit, values, philosophy, history, class, or race. Often, these authors wrote in a difficult modernist or post-modernist style. While comparing their approaches, we also considered which ones should be kept in the literary canon. One of my most difficult and challenging papers answered that question regarding Laura Riding Jackson’s “Eve’s Side

of It.” I ended up talking about my paper while showing a supplemental PowerPoint at the IU Undergraduate Research Conference in 2019.

Different perspectives and writing projects were also part of several non-English major courses. In FOLK-F 360, Indiana Folklore, I wrote about Pentecostalism as Folk Religion. I learned and wrote about catch tales and hoaxes, including themes of escape, fearful suspense, and trickery, which can be developed later into short stories. I interviewed two retired train conductors and then transcribed the recording about the tricks they played on each other.

I took an independent study course under Dr. Doug Gardner (HIST-K 495) that allowed me to research the history of my grandfather and great-grandfather. I read many books and wrote book reviews of them, and then produced a paper reflecting what I had learned about the railroad life in Illinois. This was before taking the two creative nonfiction English courses. My paper was all in past tense, fact-based, but included elements of a memoir. The title was “An Immigrant and His Son, Working on the Railroad 1878-1921.”

I thoroughly enjoyed composing a humorous piece for HIST-A 363, Indiana History. We were assigned to answer the question: What is a Hoosier? My tongue-in-cheek satiric paper is titled “The Hoosier Menu,” and I offer menu sub sections with these titles: “Obesity Boulder Selections,” “Watered-Down Anti-Federal Soup,” “Basketball Barley Soup,” “Not-So-Green Salad,” “Conservative Red & Blue Jell-O,” “Color-Line Education Coleslaw,” and three more on a similar theme.

For the technical side of thinking and writing, I created a website from scratch using HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language) and Java Script, which I learned from these courses: ENG-W 315 Writing for the Web, CSCI-N 241 Fundamentals of Web Development, and CSCI-N 341 Introduction to Client-Side Web Programming. The website is still in use. <https://anonemousecachets.com> .

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 Philatelic Society.