

Zoe Zaiss

Writing 420

Evolution Essay

Although my interests are continuously changing and my mind wanders in a million directions, I constantly yearn to learn something new. During my college writing career, I have chosen topics I know little about, from cross-modal plasticity to aluminum to myself. My writing has challenged me to be honest with my lack of knowledge, or skill, in a certain area. In turn, writing has become a way for me to grow not just as a writer, but also as a person.

In high school it was hard to use writing as a tool to grow. The essay prompts were specific and you basically discussed the teachers' desired answer in class. First semester in college I already notices a drastic change: prompts were open-ended, professors were open to various viewpoints, and I could choose topics that interested me. As a student in the Residential College, I enrolled in a more specialized first-year writing course, RCCore 100: Topics in the Science of Creativity, which was essentially about creativity and the mind. For our semester long research paper, we were able to write about *any* topic relevant to the class. Any topic? I thought back to high school when I was introduced to a blind artist, John Bramblitt. Bramblitt is a brilliant oil painting artist that uses his sense of touch to overcompensate for his loss of sight. The idea of sensory compensation fascinated me, but until freshman year, I never encountered an opportunity to learn more about his ability.

One sense being heightened to make up for the loss of another sense, I found out during my research, is called cross-modal plasticity. John Bramblitt's story of cross-modal plasticity impacted me because it made me question my previous definition of "creativity." Throughout my

research, there were many times I had to stop and look up scientific terms that I had heard of like neuroplasticity:

“During cross-modal plasticity, the neurons from lost sensory organ transfer to the intact sensory organs, leading to the enhancement of the remaining senses. The ability for the neurons to transfer from one sensory organ to another is the result of neuroplasticity¹. Neuroplasticity is the ability for neurocognitive functions to reorganize, which permits the input from an active sensory system to make up for a lost sensory system.” (RCCore100, 2012)

Although the topic far outpaced my biology knowledge, I wanted to further investigate John and other individuals’ endeavors in order to reshape the image I had of a creative person. During the assignment, I realized the importance of writing about a topic that interests you, regardless of how challenging and complex it is. John Bramblitt’s story introduced me to the world of cross-modal plasticity; RCCore 100 allowed me to delve into the world.

Delving into new worlds may be intimidating, but allowing someone else to delve into your own world is even scarier. I was sitting in my Writing 220: Introduction to the Minor in Writing when the Why I Write prompt was given to the class. I needed to analyze my own world, and I was terrified. My initial thought was, “I write because it’s a task on my agenda that I need to cross off. I’m not *actually* a writer.” But the seats surrounding the long rectangular table were filled with my peers that had a passion for writing and would consider themselves writers.

Catching some of my peers’ eyes, I doubted my ability to truthfully share my thoughts. I was caught between a rock and a hard place because I didn’t want to offend anyone, but I also didn’t want to make up some reason that would make my class expect some work of art writing.

¹ Cross-modal plasticity is a type of neuroplasticity

I decided to not taking the easy way out, which I learned from John Bramblitt, and I challenged myself to be honest with my class.

“I understand that only writing because of an assignment is not necessarily a good motivation. But, it’s better than not writing at all. Writing assignments make me consider areas of discussion I may have otherwise skipped over and allows me to discover thoughts that otherwise may have been left unexplored. So to answer your question, I chose to pursue writing because it’s a challenge, but more importantly, it’s a challenge I often learn from.

Plus, baby steps! Beginning takes time.’ (It’s Time to Begin, 2013)“

After completing this paper, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest because it was the first time I formally addressed my writing skill insecurities. Further, my paper was work shopped and openly discussed in my class. My peers provided me with constructive criticism and gave me much needed confidence. Without honesty challenging me to be truthful about Why I Write, I would not have experienced such an impactful workshop and produced a piece of writing I am so proud to share. The ability to push my fears aside and be honest was essential to my ability to become a stronger writer. The assignment helped me realize that you need to be willing to admit your flaws, especially in writing, in order to grow.

Finishing sophomore year, I already felt like my writing had drastically improved since entering college. I had consistently been presented with prompts that were engaging. Open-ended prompts enabled me to gather information on a topic I knew little about, while more specific prompts seemed to challenge me to honestly reflect on my opinions. I thought I had nailed down how to write a strong piece. But then junior year came along and I had a reality check when I was given the most boring, open-ended prompt.

For my Earth380: Mineral Resources, Economics, and the Environment research paper, we had to choose an everyday object, find out which natural resource it is predominantly made of, and research that natural resource. I'm sorry, but who wants to write about a natural resource for 16 pages? And how was I supposed to make it a solid piece of writing when I had zero interest in the topic?

You might be asking, well why did you even take the class then? First, the class fulfilled my in-major ULWR. Second, I studied sustainability in Costa Rica for a month during the summer and Earth380 supplied me with more information about natural resources and details about society's impact on the earth. So I obviously care about our earth, but I did not want to write a 16-page paper on one resource.

I debated for a long time what object I would choose to write about, and I finally decided on rivets. My family owns a rivet company that has been passed down for three generations. Although it is a very prominent object in my life, I actually do not know much about how rivets are produced, nor how my family business impacted the world we live in, which is kind of scary to consider.

During my research my nerves were calmed when I discovered the lesser environmental impact of secondary aluminum production, which is what my family predominantly utilized:

"Fortunately, there is an alternate, more sustainable option than mining aluminum: secondary production of recycled aluminum...Furthermore, aluminum can be recycled endless amount of times, which ensures the global supply of aluminum will never deplete" (English380, 2014).

Phewf.

From this assignment I learned that sometimes you have to write about a subject that does not naturally captivate you, but forming some connection with the material will help you write a stronger piece. Whenever I needed a little inspiration I would call my stepdad and talk to him about the family business, but more specifically the different types of aluminum alloys that make up the rivets. I would let him ramble on for five or ten minutes because hearing his passion for the topic fueled my own. My stepdad facilitated me with a connection to aluminum, which helped me to passionately learn about a topic and produce a paper that encapsulated the vast amount of information gained during my research.

Throughout my college writing career, I have challenged myself to be honest with my audience because I think it makes pieces more powerful and genuine. In addition to creating stronger pieces, my honest writing has enabled me to grow as a person. Now, I realize the value in admitting to a lack of knowledge because a lack of knowledge presents an opportunity to learn. I understand the importance of choosing a topic that I connect too because as long as I am passionate, I will produce a powerful piece. And with each powerful piece, I gained more insight into what it takes to produce work I am proud of and confident in.

For my capstone project, I chose a topic that will empower me to passionately write and discover unfamiliar data on a familiar topic – the college hookup culture.

The college hookup culture is extremely complex, but also thought provoking. The diversity in opinions of the current college hookup culture will be challenging to synthesize, but the enormous amount of research in the field will be intellectually stimulating. While working on

the capstone, I intend to keep an open-mind and unbiased opinion because I want this to be an educational experience for me. I think incorporating my own opinions will clout how I view the data I find and the interviews I conduct. Finally, I want my capstone project to be a piece that others go to for insight into the topic.

Similarly to my past college pieces, I aim to produce a capstone project that I am proud of and that adequately exemplifies my improved writing skills.