

Evolution Essay
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“Misconceptions, Strange Definitions, and Unfortunate Reactions:
Breaking Down Walls to Reach Creativity”

Imagine there's this one thing that you've wanted for a long time, but a voice in your head tells you it'll never be yours because you were never meant to have it. That's how I viewed writing until I was in college. But this attitude didn't come out of nowhere. When I was in elementary school, writing was a source of joy and excitement. It was a chance to express myself and put my spirit into words through stories or poems. But in middle school, I started comparing myself with my classmates. It got worse in high school when my teachers would publicly praise other's seemingly effortless eloquence to the rest of the class. But with my writing, they would smile politely and say, “it was a good start”. The more it happened, the more I compared and doubted myself. I couldn't help it. What I wrote came from inside, so when someone criticized my work as sub-par, I took it very personally. I remember this one moment when I was in awe of my classmate's beautifully written work on scuba diving. Yet when he read mine, I felt an overwhelming sense of shame as I watched him try to make sense of my awkward phrasing. As these instances became more common, I was strongly convinced that writing was an inherent gift I could never achieve. By learning that writing was a process, not an innate gift, I was able to reshape my thinking; gain confidence, and learn how to pursue creative work, something I didn't do until my sophomore year of college.

Looking back, this idea of an innate talent was partially due to my experiences as a four year old when I was first conscious that one of my arms was not like the other. I

didn't know it at the time, but there was a tumor in my bone marrow, and it needed surgery to be removed. It was a benign tumor, but its effect on my life has been far from benign. My arm would always be crooked, and I would have to get at least another ten years of check ups plus one more surgery. It's always been a part of my life that I am both curious about but tired of. Often when I do some self-reflecting, I find that it's at the end of every train of thought. In fact, almost every belief or schema that I have is somehow connected to my arm. It influenced me to think that everything I had was innately given and there was nothing I could do to improve. In reality, there was nothing I could do to actually change the shape of my arm. It was, and still is, too risky of a surgery, and there's no medical procedure or technology to truly fix it. I always felt like life intervened and stamped out my future for me; I had no control or say in the course of my own life. And so I depended on this mentality to comfort me when I wasn't naturally good at anything. It was an excuse; a way to cope with the fact that my arm would never change. But it was affecting me in a harmful way. I was too fearful about exploring new things or even trying at all. I thought if I wasn't originally good at it, it was impossible. It was easier to believe this about my writing because the most comment feedback I got was "awkward phrasing". By constantly comparing my writing with others and taking negative feedback to heart, I began to create strange definitions of what made a good writer that were based on my innate gift mentality. These three definitions became crucial checkpoints that I had to pass in order for my head to be at peace. All of these things worked together to make me view life through a specific lens, one that always held me back from truly pursuing writing.

My perspectives were very much set in stone in my early years of college. I still had low self-confidence in my writing, and while some changes began to occur, I didn't fully change until my sophomore year. My first English class in college was the start of my reshaping journey. There was nothing that had drastically changed, but it was different because my professor was treated my writing differently. As a final paper for the class, we had to write on an everyday object through many different aspects. I chose to write my paper on rings because it was something I was always curious about. As I analyzed the ring through different lenses such as historical, cultural, and media, I wrote without much planning. Part of this innate mentality was that I had strange definitions of what made "a good writer". The first was that a good writer was someone who could magically write an amazing essay with little to no effort. It was all about amazing results with no hard work. I failed to see that my idea of good writing was really a mindless process of writing whatever spewed from my brain that was unrealistic and unobtainable. In an effort to imitate my definition of "good writers", my writing practice led to words that were very bland and scattered without much intentionality. "It was interesting to see how each country took their own spin on the ring. The culture of using rings spread throughout the world and evolved as countries changed or added meanings to the ring. After learning about the history, I realized that they used rings as a symbol for eternal love because rings had no beginning and no end" (Choi 6). I had received an acceptable grade on it, but the comments on my paper said common things I've heard before: lack of focus and very broad. The difference this time was that my professor affirmed me and encouraged throughout the class to keep working on it. But instead of being motivated to try harder, I took her feedback as confirmation that I was a naturally bad writer. It was

also because I did not get the grade that I was hoping for. That was weird “good writer” definition #2: a good writer was one that could write a paper the night before and always get an A. Even if I thought the paper was good, if the feedback did not give me an A, I thought my writing had failed.

Then it happened. During my second semester, I achieved what I thought was the status of a good writer. It was through my psychology paper on Nature vs. Nurture. I knew that I couldn’t impress the GSI with my style, so I made an extra effort to follow the prompt carefully in hopes that it would get a B. It wasn’t perfect, but I wrote it methodically, making the writing clear with all the necessary components to avoid confusion: “In order to operationally discover whether I have choral singing ability, I would use methods such as sight reading, pitch matching, and having myself sing in a group. To sing choral music correctly, one must be able to sing with the correct rhythm while maintaining the correct pitch. In order to test this, I would sight read a singing exercise that contains different notes and rhythms” (Choi 1). To my surprise, I found an A neatly written on my research paper, with affirming comments from my GSI on my organization and clarity. I was ecstatic, but also confused. The A didn’t make sense, especially when she told me it one of the only As in the class. I didn’t know *why* I had been given the grade at the time. But looking back, I found it was because I followed directions carefully and focused more on clarity rather than style. Since it was a research paper, I was less self-conscious about my word choice and had freedom to think more about structure and clarity. Despite the fact that the grade achieved my weird “good writer” definition #2, it didn’t pass my “good writer” definition #3: a good writer had an amazing eloquence with words that came out of nowhere. Because of this, I was still

unsatisfied with my writing and myself. I was still so set on my definitions that even though it was the first time that I had really thought beforehand while writing, I didn't realize it or enjoy it. But it did pique my interest, and despite my fear, it made me want to explore what that meant about my writing. Sophomore year was also filled with similar experiences of my fears and mentality shrouding what was actually going on, so much so that I was blind to the fact that I was actually improving. Somewhere down there, I had a dying flicker of hope, but I was too scared to do it alone. So when Carol suggested the Writing minor program, the thought of exploring writing through a structured program gave me courage enough to do it.

Writing Minor classes quickly changed the ways in which I viewed my writing. It's almost scary to think that so much has changed in both my style and my mentality in the short span of two years. The gateway class was initially horrifying to me because we were to write and discuss each other's writing as often as possible, which was my worst nightmare. I was always terrified of people reading and judging my writing because it felt like they were stamping a label on my worth rather than the work. When we started to write our reflection essays (much like this one), I had a very hopeless attitude. I titled my essay "Desperation of a Noob Writer", because that was what I was truly feeling during the first half of the semester. It was more of a plea to my professor Shelley, than an essay. "Now for some people, writing will always be a part of their job as a tool for communicating. It's no big deal. But for me, writing is the last creative skill that I'm desperately putting on the line as a possible career path. It's not just a tool for me, but an art...but my conscience seems to think that I can't do anything creative" (Choi 1). The feedback I got was familiar: broad, and unfocused. I wasn't even surprised to receive it.

But as the class progressed, something in me started to change. What was different from my previous writing classes was that our professor stressed from the beginning that writing was a continuous process. At the time, it was frustrating to hear because I didn't want to continue to work through my writing; once I was finished, I wanted to be done with it. Again, I wanted no work with all the good outcomes.

But as my professor introduced outlines, multiple required drafts, and real peer reviews, my attitude towards good writing changed. And as we blogged weekly, I was able to reflect and think back on the lessons that I was learning in class. Previously, two of my definitions of good writers were that they had great outcomes with no real effort. But the more I learned about the process of writing through working on one piece of writing for a long time, I found that the nature of writing was all about effort and editing something little by little to make it something great. Articles and discussions with the class taught me that it was silly to expect amazing writing from the beginning, because a first draft was supposed to be horrible. Good writing meant going back to it, re-working it, and re-thinking about it every time until it becomes what you hoped it would be when you first started writing. My strange writing definitions also pointed to another falsity: writing was not a mindless craft. Through peer/professor discussions about re-purposing and having an audience, I learned that writing was a communication between an audience and a writer, and that writing meant being intentional about what I wrote. This was partially because of the way my professor ran the class. Instead of glorifying the writing of my peers like my high school teachers, my professor stressed community within our class and reminded us to help each other in our writing. It became less about comparison and more about helping each other improve our communication. Classmates became

friends who encouraged me and gave me helpful feedback about thinking of the audience. These two revelations helped me to accept my initial first drafts as bad without it defining me, and I was able to think more consciously as I wrote. And through that, I was free from my doubts and wrote intentionally, which led to more effort and re-working that improved my clarity and voice: “Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not against marriages or weddings or even engagement rings. But it’s problematic for women to only think about rings in a marriage context/connotation. It reveals how much importance is placed on weddings and marriages in a woman’s life. More importantly, placing unnecessary importance on receiving a ring for an engagement reveals the subtle, underlying sexist ideologies that still remain in our society today” (Choi 1). By taking one specific topic and continually delving into it and reworking it (with the help of my peers), I began to see writing as a process that was free to be bad in the beginning, but picky as it was revisited.

This year was when I was truly aware of my writing and how the writing minor really stretched and changed my perceptions of writing. I took a variety of writing classes from traditional literature analysis to social media writing. And instead of selling myself short, I understood my weaknesses and learned how to combat against them. By discovering and catering the writing process to my own style, I found that my writing flourished in not only my analytical skills, but in my general writing style. Writing reflection essays also made me see how I improved in specific ways. I was able to see how an attitude change really changed the ways in which I engage in my writing. In the beginning, I hated sharing my writing with others or reading other people’s writing because I was scared of being judged and compared. But now, through blogs, peer

workshops, and encouraging professors, I've come to truly love and appreciate working with others. It taught me that writing was collaborative and communal in nature.

Honestly, this “innate talent” mentality is still something that I have. It's been a part of my life for so long, so it's kind of hard to get rid of it in such a short time. I still get scared when people suggest I learn things outside of my comfort zone like organic chemistry. But I learned that most people are like that. Surprisingly a lot of people have this “innate talent” view about creative activities such as music, dance, or art in general. We put creativity on a pedestal as something that has been given to us from birth rather than a skill that has been improved over time. But this can lead to a lot of regret when honestly the biggest thing that holds people back is the fear that we never “had it” to begin with. James Hamblin from *The Atlantic* wrote an article about how kids stopped identifying as artists as they got older: “Creativity is as much about the ability to come up with ideas as it is about the courage to act on those ideas,” (Hamblin). And while I still have the fear of failing or being judged, it's not as overwhelming as it used to be. My reflection essay puts it perfectly: “...a writer's identity is never fixed. Our styles and skills are always changing; it's a continuous process of improvement and exploration...but I know that my identity is not, and should not be based on how well others write. A skill is always up for improvement. A person is always possible to change. All it takes is a couple of baby steps” (Choi). There will always be a risk in trying something new, but I've learned that it's worth it (with the help of others) when it's something that you've wanted for a long time.

Resources

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