

2. Introductory Reflective Essay (IRE) – Performance Art

My first dance recital came before my 3rd birthday. I graced the stage of my first musical at 4 years old. I had gathered a repertoire of choreography and songs before I'd ever written my first paragraph. Thanks to my early start, it was inevitable that dance and theatrics would seep into every part of my life. Throughout years of rehearsals and performances, I've been faced with many trials and tribulations. As the curtains close on ENGL1101, I can honestly say it was one of the most difficult and enlightening dances I've ever done.

Prior to this class, writing wasn't art. I had no process and saw writing projects as a checklist. Every essay had to have an introduction and three body paragraphs, followed by a conclusion restating my main points. I wrote exactly what was expected of me; nothing more and nothing less. I wrote hastily and submitted just before 11:59 PM (most of the time).

If I was writing about myself, my work was a formulated stream of consciousness, sprinkled with synonyms for basic words. My research-based writing was bland and void of any personality. I rarely even thought of a thesis statement, assuming my reader could "figure it out." I thought, why bother? If my teacher assigned the project, they should know what's going on. Somehow, I got away with it and received the grades I sought. The thought of dissecting this process and reevaluating seemed more difficult than it was worth. In a shocking twist, as our class concludes, I can say I'm happy I've started to do just that!

ENGL1101 took my flawed process and flipped it upside down. From day one, Professor Brown encouraged our class to think about writing as a process rather than a product. I opened my mind to the prospect of writing being more flexible than linear. Previously, I'd been quite flexible when writing in situations far from ideal. I tangoed with deadlines and danced around due dates. However, this kind of flexibility gave me no time to be introspective about my

process. I didn't care if my writing was good, just that it met the expectations of the project. Now that I've gotten a taste of what it's like to have creative freedom over my writing, it's become as much of an art as performance is. I want to put on the best show with my work.

Writing took rehearsal. If I hadn't attended class, I wouldn't have known where to begin with the projects we were assigned. I stretched my brain with in-class invention work and analysis of our readings. All three essays we wrote were entirely new genres for me. Though I'd read profiles and memoirs before, I'd never been given the opportunity to attempt my own. It was a central goal of mine to understand and accurately fulfill the demands of these new genres.

The memoir essay was like an improvisation dance. I didn't know how to write about my past experiences, let alone my heritage. The best way for me to accomplish it was to simply begin and figure out the steps as I wrote. Writing the profile essay had a demanding learning curve, similar to learning modern/contemporary dance coming from a classical background. I wasn't used to portraying someone else's ideas, whether I agreed with them or not. The proposal essay was as daunting as opening night. Like ballet, I had to find a balance between the rigid rules of a research paper and the fluidity of the persuasive element.

Unfortunately, twice throughout our course, I chose topics I wasn't exactly fond of. This made incorporating personal significance even more difficult, but I didn't give up. Even though I hated tap class, I stuck with it until the recital. I've realized the writing process is far more rewarding when I enjoy what I'm writing about. Not only does it benefit me, but also my audience. I learned early on that an audience can always tell when a performer's heart isn't in their work. Before, it never mattered if my writing was significant to me, it just mattered that it met the expectations of the assignment. I assumed all teachers wanted to-the-point, "no frills" work, but Professor Brown disproved my belief. Many times, his clarification would be, "I'm

leaving it up to you.” I didn’t know what to do with my newfound creative freedom, but I was excited to have it.

I definitely haven’t mastered audience awareness, but I’m happy to have begun that battle. With dance it’s easy – I wouldn’t perform a hip-hop dance in front of the elderly or perform a depressing lyrical solo to kids with cancer. Translating that to writing meant I had to give my profile essay readers a reason *why* they should care about my sister. The significance of my sex education proposal essay would fly over the head of an immature audience. I understand now why it’s important to have a clear target audience and how my work must adapt to their needs. If I don’t know who I’m writing to, how should my reader know?

I’ve known performance art is personal and can be emotionally draining, but I didn’t expect that from writing. Thinking internally about my successes and failures for the reflection work following each project made me frustrated. After I’d submitted my final draft, I was so relieved to be done I didn’t want to think of my process. However, if I didn’t take advantage of our in-class reflection time, I would’ve robbed myself of the tremendous growth it provided. Revising essays from this course forced me out of my comfort zone and I’m grateful it did. I’d forgotten how when curtains close, I always crave an encore.

Until this class, I hadn’t received effective peer review from peers writing at my same level. This time, however, their critique was as important as their praise. Dancers and writers alike, know this is the best way to improve. No performer would go on stage without ever practicing but that’s just what I did with my writing. Pre-ENGL1101, I could not tell you the last time I’d written a draft before the final submission. I’m glad that is no longer the case. Now, when I compare the first drafts with the submitted ones, I can see how they’ve progressed drastically.

The analytical part of me hates that there is no “answer” to writing. I will try, I will fail, and I will try again. No conclusion statement will give me the unattainable closure I seek. Art can inspire and impress and still be developed. I cannot help but grow with each new writing project, so while not all my past work *needs* to be developed, the perspective gained from growth never hurts. Performing arts have been a main focus of my life, so much so that I cannot help seeing the parallels. The writing process has become as expressive as performing arts now that I allow it to be.

Now, there’s a spark that’s been lit inside me that seeks to master English. However, I don’t think you can “master” art. Thankfully, there is always more to be explored and created. Thanks to my experience in ENGL1101, I have discovered a new form of art I can continue to grow in. I’m reminded of some of my favorite quotes when I think about my writing process now. Philosopher Alan Watts wrote, “to dance is not the aim to get to one point of the room to the other, but to enjoy the dance.” Kierkegaard makes me think perhaps writing, like dance, like art, and like life, is, “not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.”