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Final Reflection (2019-2020)

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“Final Reflection,” Danny Zhang (critical evaluation example)

Questions to Consider For Discussion and Reflection

As you read Zhang’s critical evaluation piece, consider:

- How does Zhang approach critical evaluation in his essay? What claims does he make about the development of his writing? How does he use evidence to support those claims?
- How does Zhang connect to the concept of voice or style in the writing process? Where do you see him making those connections? How do you think this helps contribute to the central purpose of his essay?
- Throughout this essay, Zhang explains to the reader how his CPN course has helped him not only recognize how he can improve his writing, but also how it can help him in other classes. As you think about your own critical evaluation, how do you see your CPN course helping you in other contexts?

Final Reflection by Danny Zhang

My sister had once told me that my writing sounds nothing like the way I talk, and I never knew what she meant until I wrote more heavily in Cortland. At the time, I took what she said literally and thought most people do not even write the way they text, let alone write. But I did not understand that my sister was talking about my style of writing, she was not actually comparing how I spoke and wrote. She knew me well enough to know my thinking process, and that my style of writing was undeveloped at conveying it. In high school, I never really developed my style of writing. I went to a specialized high school for math and science, so writing was not the focus and even when I did write, it was only to recall content rather than to improve my writing. Even on the English regents, we were asked to identify the rhetorical tools used in a sample essay and analyze how the author used them rather than using the same rhetorical tools to create our own essay.

The piece of writing I am most proud of in high school was my common application essay, but looking back on it, it was no longer as perfect as I thought it was. I was proud of the reports I spent weeks on writing for AP Environmental Science and the essays I scored high on for history class, but these were incomparable to my common application essay. I put a tremendous amount of effort into it; it was the first time I did drafts for a piece of writing, or had other people read over it. Most importantly however, it was the first time I had wrote about something I truly cared about. I had the most talented writers I knew review my essay, from the most talented writers I knew from Johns Hopkins to the most gifted writers in my high school. For weeks it was the only thing on my mind, and all the hard work I poured into it paid off. I got into colleges I should not have gotten into and I attributed it to my common application essay. For some time, I thought I would never produce a piece of writing as good as it. But the more I wrote in Cortland, the more I realized that my writing had much to be improved on.

I thought I would have the worst first semester when I found out that all of the courses I was taking were writing intensive, but I now appreciate the amount I wrote because of how much it has improved my writing. The first writing assignment in Cortland was the narrative essay. I was having a lot of trouble brainstorming and just could not begin writing, and I realized it was because I had very little experience writing narrative and creative pieces. I decided it would be a good idea to look back on my common application essay and start from there since it was one of the few narrative pieces I had written. But as I read through the essay, something felt off about it, but I could not put my finger on what. It really did not help me start on my narrative essay either. As I progressed through the drafts of my narrative essay, I kept comparing it back to my common application essay. My narrative essay seemed better than my common application essay even though I did not put in as much effort and drafted it a lot less. Eventually, after comparing the two numerous times, it clicked in my head. My common application essay not necessarily worse than my narrative piece, in fact, it is even better written. The problem with it was that it was not written in my style. I was so caught up in having other writers who I considered being better than me weighing in on the essay that the final product did not even seem to be produced by me. I realized that although peer review is very useful in improving your writing, it should not overtake your style of writing. After this realization, I knew the best way for me to convey my thoughts through writing was to write in my style, and to do so, I had to improve on writing in my style.

The other aspect of writing I significantly improved on was my understanding of audience. When writing in high school, all I had to do was recite information. I was not exposed to different types of writings often and certainly did not have to write in different forms. As long as I remembered the content, and my writing reflected that, then I was well off. But in Cortland, it was no longer as simple. Every class, and to a smaller extent, every assignment required me to write differently. In writing studies and anthropology, my voice and opinion was an essential part of my writings. But in earth science and history, I had to exclude myself in all of my writings and do a lot more research. I wrote my first APA style paper in earth science, and my professor told me to cite every single thing that was said and that nothing was my original idea. But when writing my argumentative essay for writing studies, I was encouraged to include myself in my writing even though my first instinct was not to. After writing in different forms and subjects, I realized that I had to adapt to who and what I was writing for. My audience for a research paper does not want to know what I think about the Minoan eruption while my audience would not be very convinced if I were to just list facts in my argumentative essay.

Writing more and in different forms has vastly improved me as a writer. I am no longer proud of the writings I do because of the grades they earn or the colleges they get me into, rather I appreciate the effort I put into them and the purpose I write them for. As great as my common application essay was, the meaning and insight that potentially could have been put in it by me was lost because I did not include enough of myself in it. The people who helped me write it were great writers, but they had their own styles and did not live through the experience I wrote about like I did. Writing more in Cortland has allowed me to recognize my faults as a writer in the past and improve on them in the future. I am in no way, shape, or form a perfect writer, but I have definitely improved on my writing throughout this semester in Cortland, and I am proud of this progression I have made as a writer.