

Process Reflection - Erik Halenkamp

What did you learn about yourself and your own relationship to learning through the process of creating, collecting, selecting, and connecting your work?

In what ways is this learning portfolio unique? How does it capture your personal learning experience and voice?

The process of learning is unique for each person to undertake it, and this portfolio represents yet another aberration from a conformist idea of education. It is the culmination of a very individualized journey, in which global and local circumstances found me in the driver's seat, deciding what and how I was going to learn for what truly felt like the very first time. While high school was very rigid in its curriculum and very particular about the educational experience of each student, I learned very quickly that university was going to be wildly different.

Courses like HON 101 introduced me to critical thinking in a way that I hadn't yet seen before, and imbued the skills to independently verify and challenge sources. These skills were further bolstered by LIB 151, which (very tediously, mind you) imparted necessary research skills. They were both designed to help each student learn valuable skills, but the importance they held for my class was forever emphasized as the Spring of 2020 brought with it a very different kind of obstacle. I suddenly found myself sitting at home, alone, without so much as a classroom, peers, or a professor to direct my learning. Suddenly, everything meant to be done in a setting with helpful peers was offloaded onto my suddenly-very-lonely back. As class formats changed, I soon learned that attending lectures did next to nothing, as referencing the course

slides was a much faster and much less convoluted way for me to discern information. Instead of listening to disinterested lectures from professors who were obviously ticked off about having to teach virtually, I acquired the skill of learning almost all course content from the materials provided and external sources.

Such was the crux of my major education. I cruised through a majority of my software engineering courses in this manner, taking personal accountability in teaching myself about common web technologies, network administration, systems analysis, and so much more. The technologies used to create this portfolio were self-taught during this time, and I realized after a semester of getting used to it, I excelled as a student in the new format. Tedious busy work had been eradicated, lectures I normally had a hard time sitting through were replaced with documents, web searches, and database research I could easily read, digest, and gain a better understanding from than if I had used any other method. I wanted this portfolio to represent the independent nature of my education—it is the realization of skills I learned almost entirely on my own, and employed more effectively than if I had learned them from another. Its format as a website is meant to diverge from convention, as did the educational path of my peers and myself while the world came to a crashing halt.

It was during COVID that I took the first of my three track courses: PSCI 286 - Value Issues in a Political Economy. The course was fully virtual, but I was forced to treat it much differently than almost all of my other classes during that time, owing to its unique structure. There were no intermediary assignments to garner understanding, but instead a midterm essay, a final essay, and an attendance grade. Those three grades made up the entirety of your mark, and it also meant that each essay question was a culmination of a half a semester's worth of lectures (and thus, almost impossible to reliably research without having attended a majority of lectures).

The course exemplified the pre-COVID expectations of attendance and attention, two things I was not very keen on at the time. However, both the midterm and final essay prompts were given out two weeks before they were due, and we were allowed to undertake supplemental research as well. I ended up learning more about the ideologies the course covered in the two weeks before each essay was due than I did through listening to Zoom lectures every other week. In the end, shouldn't the point of taking a course be to learn as much as one can on a given topic? It made me wonder why so many other professors simply relied on a memorize-for-testing scheme of learning as opposed to this new kind of experience. The other courses I took for the Life of the Mind track would only exemplify this ideal of academic freedom further.

Soon businesses and schools started reopening, and I was dreading going back to a pre-COVID formula—I had much appreciated the opportunity to self-teach, as I felt I was making the most out of the time I had. My very first semester back was with my second track course, ENG 195 - JRR Tolkien's Middle Earth. While I was considerably interested in the course material before starting, I was under the impression the class was going to be oppressive with busy work, as is the pitfall with many 100-level courses. It was here I learned, however, that I wasn't the only one to adapt my learning strategy to be more independent over COVID quarantine, and the professor of this course came prepared to fit that reality for many students. Each day consisted of an in-class discussion, while weekly quizzes and sparse papers were handled entirely online. It was an in-person class intentionally designed to be hybridized, and thus fit the needs of many students (including myself) looking for a less synchronous class format. It was able to fit my particular time needs during the inaugural months of my business, RecordWall, like no other class I took that semester could do. This flexibility happens to be a common theme between what I felt my two most fulfilling track courses were: ENG 195 and

HUM 320. In both, I was able to complete small, relatively insignificant assignments on my own time, and it meant wonders for the laden schedule I found myself pursuing in my final two semesters. Whereas PSCI 286 had no assignments whatsoever, the lack of strict due dates on the assignments that did exist in ENG 195 meant I was incentivised to go back and complete late work I otherwise would've passed on or been locked out of. That meant more aggregate knowledge, only augmented by the newfound ability to work when I *could*, not when I *needed to* in order to meet strict deadlines.

This concept of flexibility would carry over the very next semester as I started HUM 320 - Digital Humanities, but even more paramount. Not only did I desperately need this class to be low-maintenance due to heavy-effort Constitutional Law, Operating Systems, and Senior Project coursework clogging up my schedule, but I found myself learning a lot more from working at my own pace than I did in any of the aforementioned note-taking and attendance oriented classes. Never before on the very first day of class has an instructor asked us, the students, to design how the course assignments would work, be graded, and when they were due. It was a taste of the democratic process in a place I wasn't used to getting a say, and an experience of deciding once again where and how my own education would take me. The semester project's call was purposefully open-ended to foster creativity and unique submissions. It went as broadly as the field for which the class is named to allow research on subtopics each student was already familiar with and actually cared about. Resulting from this decision on the part of the professor was a very individualized and intellectually stimulating course—fitting for a class oriented towards research about a burgeoning field—yet oddly elusive throughout the rest of my education.

The importance of individualized education cannot be overstressed. It seems like such an obvious concept but individuality still saw very little emphasis in the non-MIND courses I pursued. The idea of individualism in education sounds like a pipe dream: surely there's no way student-led course design is possible in massive freshman level courses, right? Correct, but not every course has to be like HUM 320, with its ten-person class size and democratic approach to education. Even for students that benefit from a conformist curriculum and schedule, course adjustments as small as indefinite deadlines created significantly less pressure throughout the semester and allowed me the flexibility of moving at my own pace when necessary. Some professors, such as the one I had for PSCI 286, have even made tests available for a week or two before they're due. It makes the incidental pile-up of assignments and study-time so much easier to manage, and I unambiguously retained a lot more information when I was allowed to fully organize my own time. Because each track course employed this concept to varying degrees, I recall much more from them than I do from most of their contemporaries. This understanding brought with it something I thought I already knew—my way of learning is valid for me and should be emphasized if I want to see educational success. As such, in deciding which institutions to apply for law school at, I plan to keep in mind this idea of flexibility, and what it means for my success as a student.

This portfolio was made with that individual spirit in mind. A binder may have been easier to put together, but I wanted something expressive of both my main topic of study (Software Engineering) and the fluidity with which I prosper. I hope it serves as a nice break from the monotony of flipping through paper essays, and a proper representation of what and how I've learned.