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My Evolution as a Writer: Searching for Credibility

The closer I come to the end of my college career, the less I feel like a student. And while it's true that the constant pressures of grades and due dates have become tiresome seventeen years into my academic career, I don't mean that my desire to learn is any weaker. In fact it's probably stronger than ever, as know where my interests lie better than ever. Rather, the feeling I have seems more accurately a response to entering adulthood. Being a student has always meant assuming an identity tied to the completion of assignments for instructors. These days, however, the writing I do demands a purpose beyond solely a professor's determination of competency, and instead is linked much more intimately with my own creative intentions. It comprises the process of trying to create meaningful work outside the context of the student-teacher dynamic. After all, what is the point of writing when there is no one to assign a project and judge it? It must lie with a personal desire for expression, and one which contributes to the body of thought that others deem important enough to study. As I read over some of my past college writing, revealed was a gradual awareness of this transition: from the safe haven of studenthood to the uncertain domain outside of it. Now, the questions that arise explore how this transition is realized, and about what gaining credibility truly entails.

A large portion of my uncertainty about bridging the gap to credibility stems from the realization that there is something more to it than just practice - even though this may still

comprise the bulk of it. Being a musician, I know about the centrality of practice to improvement. But becoming credible is something more than improvement: it requires a more active process of self-identifying as someone who is capable of contributing value. My experience with music sheds some light on this process. As an example, I began playing the double bass when I was nine years old. I took lessons for ten years, and in that sense I was literally a student for the entirety of that period. Yet there was a gradual transition that occurred in my playing which is hard to pinpoint chronologically, but where I emerged from studenthood while still remaining a student. I gained confidence, and realized that I was a bassist *as well as* a double bass student. There was a tangible result in my playing, too: I began to create music, rather than just play notes off the page. In other words, any successful musician or writer knows that the process of learning is ongoing, but they also know that they enter a phase when they become more than just a passive absorber and reproducer of knowledge. They begin contributing to their field in a way that is personally purposeful, and thus outwardly meaningful and unique. This realization and subsequent transition carries a weighty responsibility, but one that bridges the juncture before credibility is attained. It is the responsibility of accounting for your ideas before yourself and your readership, rather just an instructor who can give you the benefit of the doubt.

A parallel scenario to my experience playing bass can be observed in an book review I wrote last semester in English 225: Academic Argumentation. In the class, we read a newly published ethnography by sociologist Alice Goffman titled *On The Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. It entails, in her words, "an on-the-ground account of the US prison boom: a close-up look at young men and women living in one poor and segregated Black community [in

Philadelphia] transformed by unprecedented levels of imprisonment...policing, and supervision (xii). In my review, I found myself actually writing *as* a critic, rather than just trying to adopt the style of one. I aimed for specificity in my comments, coming off praiseworthy of certain aspects (*"She presents the 6th street men as prey to the punitive tactics that police consistently employ"*), but skeptical of others (*"Rather than appreciating the cold objectivity she used at some of the book's most dramatic moments, it felt like there was an aspect of subjective commentary that had been consciously omitted"*). I was also referential where it strengthened my case *("Drake and Harvey speak about the importance of [blending in with the group], adding "the ethnographic researcher must manage his or her role in these varying contexts through a range of 'virtual identities'"*). At the same time, my review is far from perfect, and struggles especially toward the end from vacillation in my argument between critique of Goffman's over-categorization of her subjects and the necessity of this tactic:

> *"Another gray area that I found unsettling at times was Goffman's consistent categorization of people in the neighborhood..."*
> *"I understand their usefulness in distinguishing between behavior, but to write an ethnography with such a pervasive system of categorization is at times objectifying."*
> *"This is not to say that the people she write about are not complex, because I think she portrays them as so..."*
> *"It is to say, however, that these labels should not define the people she talks about…"*

However, I think this flaw signifies unsteadiness in a newfound position grappling with credibility rather than an unawareness of this process altogether. I still am thinking like a critic, be it a novice one, but instead of simply regurgitating generalities, I attempt to carve out my own perspective. Most importantly, this piece signifies a heightened awareness of the transition to credibility; it is an active step toward achieving it.

As I stated above, with new and unique contributions to a field comes greater responsibility. This is no better illustrated than in scientific research, where ideas expressed can literally affect people's health and wellbeing. My sophomore year, I participated in the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program, which pairs students with professors in labs and allows them to gain research experience and prepare a presentation about it. Critical to this process is the writing of an abstract, which outlines the basis, purpose, and importance of the research project. In my case, I worked with Dr. Yongqun He on his vaccine database, specifically identifying genetic markers of influenza vaccine efficacy. Previously I had written abstracts for class assignments, but they never carried weight beyond the the requirements of the class; now I had a chance to actually write about research that would contribute to the field of bioinformatics. While my work in the lab was minimal compared to some, I eventually contributed enough to be listed as a co-author on a paper that was published in the journal *Nucleic Acids Research*. My involvement in UROP underscores how so much of gaining credibility is contextual, and is affected by the communities with which we associate. Had I not actively joined, I would never have had the opportunity to contribute to the field. Now when I write abstracts, it is still under the scrutiny of professors, but with the experience of writing them as a researcher rather than just a student.

The responsible of writing credibly carries emotional weight too. I took English 325: Art of the Essay this past summer term, and for the our creative nonfiction pieces I wrote about a friend I had made in high school playing in youth orchestra together, and how my opinion on music's role in my own life changed after he passed away earlier that year while I was studying abroad. The essay was long and awkward- I never really felt comfortable sharing thoughts that I

had never even spoken to anyone about. But I also felt like I could not write an honest essay without including them: how I felt when I heard the news, the strangeness of a friend dying who I were no longer close with. I think part of my motivation in writing it was to preserve some of the memories that were now my sole responsibility to maintain. As a result, I struggled with which stories to include, or how to describe him. I didn't know where to start or end. How was I to do him justice in an essay? Ultimately I was never fully satisfied, but I had to trust my own judgment, I had no choice. What I felt most comfortable with were the facts. I ended the piece with this:

> *"I called my mom the night I heard the news, and she ended up going to the funeral. She told me it was a beautiful service, that there were a lot of people there and that an ensemble from his school played. Unbelievably sad, she said, but good to be there. She also attached the program. I knew Andy had written music, but I never knew he wrote poetry. There were two poems attached. One caught my eye, called "belonging." In it there was a line: " The meadow is a perfect place for a rock/What could possibly go wrong...?" I never could have imagined. I clicked through to the cover of the program, a picture of him, proud in his tuxedo, bass in hand. That night, as I sat wide awake in bed listening to Sibelius 2, I could still hear him playing next to me, lost in the page, quarter notes marching on."*

Arriving at the end of my college career has meant truly listening to myself. What am I passionate about, what do I find purpose in? With the independence from academic structure that will accompany graduating (until, that is, I go to graduate school), these questions seem more pressing than ever. And I see them reflected in my writing as my goals broaden from the narrow scope of an assignment or a class to an extension of myself. Recognizing this dual departure from studenthood but continuation as a learner is what credibility in my writing means. It is about valuing my own work, and knowing that I have the potential and the responsibility to shape thought and opinion.

Works Cited

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