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Final Reflection FYS 100-50

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After writing thousands upon thousands of words this semester, I look back on the first assignment in Social Utopias, a description of what utopia is in my own words, and I see just how far my thinking, organizational, and analytical skills have come. However, my growth is not stunted there. My rhetorical, argumentative, and critical assessment skills have all been accelerated in the same fashion. Every step in the thinking and writing processes has been practiced and refined in both solo and group environments, and each refinement has subsequently compiled with the next to synthesize an overall elevation in my levels of writing, thinking, and reading analysis. Each paper I compose is another another brick in the continual construction of my understanding and appreciation for the realm of the written word.

My writing this semester begins with a 500 word paper arguing my own definition of utopia. Although the assignment is not my most complete work, I managed to gain learning experiences from this argumentative piece. I learned that my mechanics and organization of thoughts and overall address to the topic at hand needed to be tighter and more direct, since I strayed from the question at hand and discussed the physical attributes of a utopia rather than its societal makeup (see FYS Paper #1). I gained insight in strengthening the grip on my words when I reviewed *Lessons in Clarity and Grace,* which would continue to be a pivotal book for me as the months continued. As I transitioned into the successive response paper, I made my directive immediately evident by placing my topic in the opening sentences and I ensured that the topic of justice remained at the forefront of my focus (see FYS Paper #2). Although this was not my preferred method of writing at first, I could easily see the advantages in diving straight into the meat of discussion and forcing each word to be necessary and purposeful. The virtue of concise writing was being forced upon me through limited word count and abundance of information.

This process of filtering critical and relevant information through a narrow window of argument culminated for the first time as the class transitioned from response paper three into our first essay. This 1300-word monstrosity represented my first collision with the collegiate writing process; I syphoned through wells of literary information within Plato’s Republic to produce a comprehensive argument on the Guardians and their living embodiment of justice and happiness (see Essay #1). I composed three drafts for this first essay and reviewed the flow of ideas and information numerous times in an attempt to whittle my writing into both a compact and streamlined discourse. While the effort I placed into my style certainly paid off in the gradebook, my unequal distribution of emphasis backfired upon me in the rubric under the evidence and substantive argument categories (see Essay #1 rubric). Ironically enough, my weakest point in the first essay became my strongest in the subsequent essay as my critical thinking and reading skills began to flourish. The second essay was a true challenge for my ability to stitch together dissonance and harmony between two separate pieces of writing. Although I succeed in synthesizing the two in form, I lost some meaning and direction in my argument (see ESSAYTWO). I really struggled in matching a concise, clear argument and analysis with a writing style that felt natural to me.

As the semester progressed, the focus of the course seemed to shift more heavily toward the critical evaluations of our readings, which was quite sensible after building our writing and style foundation. The course began broaching this concept through a group evaluation of an exhibit source, which called for my groupmates and me to investigate and present to the class. I could feel the task of determining pertinent information being transferred to my own faculties. Further evidence of this responsibility shift was made apparent in response paper five, where the topic question was highly generalized, leaving me to make a path of my own amidst the wealth of information (see PeteRP5). In assessing my group’s presentation, the professor submitted highly positive feedback on our use of evidence and ability to draw connections between sources. For me, this signaled that my mental process of assessing written works was progressing along a rectified path. Then, in the wake of the first self-reflection, the burden of full responsibility landed entirely on my shoulders with response papers six and seven. In the case of the former, we drew up analytical response questions as a class in preparation for the latter, which charged us with the task of self-generating our own question. The immediate feedback from the class exercise, coupled with the *Style* chapters on formulating a question and composing the opening paragraph, resulted in a significantly positive impact upon my writing. I learned to set the tone and topic of my piece with the introductory sentences, and I began to clearly recognize the formula for identifying where argumentative questions could be drawn from writing.

Then, all of those skills conglomerated in the independent research project. As I researched the Shakers, I deciphered which sources were most relevant to the topic question I had outlined for myself. At the same time, I had to remain open minded to anything that might enhance or refine my research further, which was the case with multiple sources. I learned that anything I read which peaked my interest into subsequent investigation made for excellent sourcing material and had potential to influence the center of gravity for my research. After compiling all of my annotated sources, I then had to develop an orderly presentation on both the research I had set out to perform, and the process by which that research evolved and progressed. I was very satisfied with my presentation and my ability to integrate the chronological sequence of Shaker events with my chronological progression of research. The end result was a culmination of the processes of extracting relevant information from sources using critical reading and thinking, manufacturing that information into a focused argument, delivering that focused argument in conjunction with a summary of research refinement, and presenting that same argument in a concise, comprehensive manner (Oral Presentation, December 1, 2015).

While certain forms of assignments this semester have honed in on a more stylistic or analytical facet of writing, the oral projects and general class discussion allowed me to demonstrate these skills in totality. The initial oral group assignment was an excellent opportunity to display my budding abilities to formulate a question from a piece by Erasmus and assemble relevant data from both Erasmus and More that supported my connections between them (Oral Presentation, October 8, 2015). After thriving under the pressure of the presentation, I felt that I grasped the process quite solidly, and I was so confident for the solo oral report that I jumped at the opportunity to present first. Familiarizing myself with my Shaker research, I felt quite comfortable and confident in relaying my research process and findings on the Shakers’ societal differences and ultimate causes of regression (Oral Presentation, December 1, 2015). Another constant source of practice in synthesizing thoughts and ideas into concise verbal communication was the in-class discussion. Discussions provided each individual with the opportunity to practice mentally organizing their assessments of sources into related categories. Although it was not obvious at the time, the class discussions were preparing us for the independent research assignment since August.

Overall, the semester of Social Utopias has afforded me with a remarkable amount of advancement in my critical thinking, reading, and communication skills both written and verbal. Each assignment served a function as a preparatory step toward the culminating assignment of independent research. My training began from the first day when I wrote my definition of a utopia; from that assignment alone I see that I was being trained to organize my ideas and be intentional and purposeful and commit my focus to the question at hand. Gradually, the task of finding my own method of questioning was made more essential. I was forced to think harder and observe not only the surface of the words but the meanings that might dwell beneath them. Such insight was necessary in order to gather as much relevant information as possible. Then, low stakes response papers morphed into high stakes essays with overarching themes and multiple angles of argument, where the real challenge was not in digging for as much information as possible but in filtering only what was essential. I have learned how to aptly handle both broad and restricted subject matter thanks to the all-encompassing nature of this course, and the skills I have developed and sharpened in the realm of the written word will most certainly benefit myself and those whose pieces I edit in the near future.

I pledge that I have neither received nor given unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work. Peter George Plotas