

PORTFOLIO REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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There is importance to me to give this essay careful consideration. Upon reflection, my original personal essay was thoughtful and honest. As I reread my words, I can remember the anticipation for beginning the Master's program at UNCG. I used the description that the "Master of Arts in Liberal Studies is so exciting and interesting to me" because it proclaimed to be "a place to be inspired". The academic curriculum, online technology, along with the personal and professional growth opportunities seemed unlimited. That excitement was partnered with the hope I could balance a full time job and motherhood with the expectations of the program. The University's mission to serve a "learner-centered, accessible, and inclusive community fostering intellectual inquiry..." was exactly what I wanted. The University's desire to "make a difference in the lives of students..." matched my own personal motivation to do the same within my own classroom. In fact, in my personal essay I wrote "My interest (in the program) stems from the adaptability of the curriculum into my own teaching. My professional experience has clarified one certainty: if you are inspired by what you teach, it is more likely the students will learn and be inspired as well". I regarded this concept to be probable; however, certainly the experience and journey has well exceeded my original anticipation.

Reflection has been a large component of this experience. Two years ago when I was applying, I found meaning in considering why I wanted to take this step. That personal retrospect was healthy as I noted, "I have considered attacking a Master's degree for quite some time". A combination of circumstances and my honest interest in being a lifelong learner contributed to finally making the commitment to pursue the degree. I felt intensity about wanting to be a graduate student at UNCG, promising I would "offer your program loyalty and a touch of creativity". Through determined work and focus, I am proud to now be reflecting on this endeavor.

The MALS program has had several significant impacts on my life, personally and professionally. Most importantly I underwent change in four main areas: **professional growth and maturity, personal renewal and enlightenment, a more disciplined understanding of global content and a better developed sense of creative expression.** I had anticipated interesting and insightful curriculum, as well as diversity in coursework and professors; however, I was unaware I would experience personal spiritual growth, enlightened global awareness, and innovative professional ideas. I was also unaware I would embrace the pace and rigor of the classes, immediately use new information in my own classroom, and be inspired to take more risks and not fear change.

I understood the MALS program to have a diverse choice of classes and professors. In fact, one of the most intriguing characteristics of the program was it had "...a wonderful patchwork of learners, various people from scattered areas with diverse talents and strengths". I wanted to be a part of that community and immediately was thrust into dialogue and discussion with students from all over the world. It *was* truly inspiring. The diversity was not just the student body, but it was the way in which each student thought and expressed their views. The design of the online courses allowed for everyone's work to be read by each student. At first, I was intimidated by this process. I was more accustomed to turning in papers for the professor's eyes only. The idea of collaboration, as well as commenting on other's work was new to me. This process was life changing. This was actually a learning journey, and I was allowed to evolve along the way. The online technology was quite intimidating at first. I originate from the "old school", non-internet days, as I graduated with my undergraduate degree in 1994. I loved the way in which the professors (and students) used technology to access information, create blog discussions, assign group projects and download videos. Once I found comfort in navigating the websites, I travelled in amazement at the information and opportunities. Through this effort and experience, I have adapted my own classroom to engage in reflective discussion and peer commenting. By using phrases like "Have you considered..." and "I wonder if..." my students have learned to express opinions without disrespect and disregard to different points of view. Intellectual debate does not have to be aggressive. As a teacher of history, I am always looking for ways in which I can help students reach their learning potential. Collaboration in a classroom setting can often be full of distraction; the online courses have enabled me to see collaborative work from a technological angle. Blogs and discussion groups, as well as video conferencing and social networks can all be fascinating tools for a classroom. Several of my professors assigned group projects which demanded thorough contributions from all group members. Having to manage individual's schedules, constructively critique one another's work, and meet the requirements and deadlines of the assignments created the need for consistency, organization, responsibility, analytical review and compromise. These experiences better developed my critical thinking, personal responsibility and social connectedness with my classmates. In fact, Christine Gunderson and I worked on several projects together; I have never met Christine in person, but through our work and time together we developed a respect for each other's work. In an email exchange, she writes "Great work Laura. This has really been an amazing (and difficult!) experience. Thanks for all of your hard work...I think it will pay off with our grade! Hope to "see" you in another course!" Professionally, I have been renewed by engaging in such camaraderie. I now better appreciate the benefits to working, discussing and relying on a group. I have also advanced in my comforts with technology and the many facets technology can play within a learning community.

“We learn by going where we have to go.” I used that phrase in my personal essay (twice!). Obviously those words have relevance to me, especially in the context of my life journey. The MALS program opened a new chapter in my life. After completing 12 hours of course work, I had an opportunity to leave my very comfortable public teaching job, one I had called my “dream job” for quite some time, to teach AP World History at an all-girls private boarding school—Salem Academy. This opportunity was flattering and scary, as change can often be. “To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often” reminded Winston Churchill. The truth is I found my confidence to take this blind step because of the exposure the MALS course had given me. I felt more determined to embrace challenge, explore diverse environments and be willing to take risks. The opportunity to inspire young women to finish the “unfinished revolution” was appealing. I noted in my final paper for the Age of Revolutions course,

“The Feminist Revolution is the antithesis of the traditional male dominant social structure. The Feminist Revolution has a relatively clear starting point, but still remains ongoing regarding gender equality and the issues pertaining to worldwide gender oppression”.

Salem Academy has 200 students. Almost one-fourth of the students are international boarders, many from China and South Korea, as well as Turkey, Germany, Ghana and Thailand. Our western point of view is often different from these young women. As stated in my Contemporary World paper,

“Although many Western societies have adapted new regulations, laws, and opinions to give women similar opportunities to men, many nations throughout the world continue to oppress, discriminate, and abuse women. Many countries on the continent of Africa, the Middle East, as well as China continue traditions which disregard the value of women. In many developing countries, a being female often means “being sentenced to a life of poverty, abuse, exploitation and deprivation” (womensrights.org).

Today, I am teaching to a unique group of learners. I credit the MALS program for giving me the insight, courage and confidence to have made the change.

During the duration of my course work, I experienced some emotional (and spiritual) challenges. Both my mother and father (divorced, living in separate states) were diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. The sadness and challenges of the diagnoses were emotional strains, partnered with the responsibility of care, estate management and legal matters. Rather than dismiss the MALS program, I was determined to keep moving forward. My Global Human Rights course certainly gave me a meaningful perspective of life’s challenges and setbacks. I am living a privileged life in comparison to many. I embraced being present in each moment of my life and grateful for every day. My Creative Expression class coincided with my heaviest moments. I was a novice poet and

found the process of analyzing and creating poetry therapeutic. In my poem *The Ocean*, I revert to my childhood memories of growing up in Virginia Beach. I wrote,

“Just a crack of the window revealed my salt water bliss---the familiar childhood scent was like a gentle kiss...”

The art of writing poetry was cautious to me; however, it began to reveal to me a brilliant release of emotion.

“To find balance, forgiveness and moments of grace---and heal my resentments of others’ mistakes...”

The feedback from classmates was honest and thoughtful. I felt changed after completing that course.

My interest in having a more disciplined understanding of global content was a significant factor in applying to the MALS program. Originally, I believed this Master’s degree would simply make me a better teacher. Many of the courses offered aligned with my teaching experiences: World History, Civics and Economics, and U.S. History. I imagined being able to use my more developed understanding of global issues and history to challenge my students. This certainly has been the case. The depth and detail each course provided allowed me to better comprehend the chronological, social, economic and political components of different areas throughout the world. Relevant historical and modern issues were presented for discussion, debate, and understanding. I was constantly challenged with arguments for and against different circumstances, engaging in tolerant dialogue from classmates and professors. In a paper defending the University of North Carolina for selecting Michael Sell’s book, *Approaching the Qur’an*, as the summer reading choice for incoming freshman, I wrote:

“The opposition to a text because it does not support a certain bias or viewpoint should not eliminate it from the curriculum; in fact, those characteristics might just enhance the likelihood of being selected... I applaud the choice as bold and courageous because of the timing. While the nation fostered stereotypes of Muslims and Islam, UNC-Chapel Hill was exercising “academic freedom” and championing tolerance and showing “sympathy” to their Muslim peers (Zernike, 2002). UNC chose to advocate “knowledge over ignorance” and maintained their commitment to “opening the door to a universe of knowledge” (www.unc.edu).

Not only did I experience a better global perspective in regard to religion, ethnic conflicts and social justice; I more clearly understood the impact western policies had on the rest of the world. I wrote,

“The Contemporary World since 1945 has included many significant themes including, but not limited to: the Cold War, nationalism, terrorism, neo-colonialism, and racial conflict. These themes are complicated and often woven together in layers; finding one

to consider the “most important” in shaping the contemporary world must be given much reflection”.

Many of the courses challenged me to make predictions, support theories, analyze data, and evaluate information. I argued,

“Predicting the most significant issue of our global future is difficult; however, I argue the ethnic, racial and religious conflicts, namely in Africa, are of the greatest concern. The African continent has been victim to the effects of colonization and indiscriminate borders created by Europeans. Many now suffer from civil war, political instability, a severe refugee problem, critical world hunger, and the AIDS epidemic. These factors have created a global crisis needing attention and thoughtful direction by a supportive community”.

However, the content knowledge has not just impacted my professional growth; it has also impacted me personally. Relevant modern issues such as China’s current environmental issues, enslaved children around the world, social and economic impacts of globalization and free trade, as well as current issues with refugees and genocide have all been rooted in my thinking. I was not fully aware this program would direct me to consider social justice, environmental responsibility and humanitarian commitments. The depth of each course introduced multiple layers of information, asking for higher levels of cognitive thought. In an intellectual exercise comparing China and India’s market potential, I argued

“By 2030, India will become the “most populous nation on Earth” and will have the largest workforce in the world (986 million working age people)” (Meredith, 132). India’s government is committed not to squander an opportunity to “promote economic growth” and “keep living standards from declining” (Meredith, 133). As suggested by former Indian finance secretary, Vijay Kelkar, “India is now on the threshold of a golden age of growth.” I confidently recommend expanding TSI to India”.

This practice, as well as many others, helped me better understand global expansion and challenged me to analyze data and statistics.

Another aspect of the MALS program that stretched my experience as a student was the development of a more creative written expression. Through unit activities, blogs, essays and poems, I explored areas of writing less comfortable to me. Poetry better allowed me to express my feelings:

“The comforts of coastal smells are like my mother’s embrace---Possessing balance, beauty, and moments of grace...”

As well as:

“I took a sip of honesty, an unfamiliar taste it seemed to quench my need to be with you...”

The creativity was not limited to poetry. I embraced an assignment about Plato by using short story format to answer the prompt.

“It is mid-morning, and the chill of winter cuts through the brightness of the sun. The streets are sprinkled with bundled walkers, most of whom keep their heads down to avoid the sharp whipping winds. On the corner of street is the local coffee shop, and Plato knows he will find warmth and conversation inside. As he enters, he notices three distinct things: first, written on the daily specials board it read: Thought of the day: ‘The nature of God is a circle of which the center is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere’; second, it seemed the coffeehouse was out of his favorite biscotti; and finally, hunkered in the corner, sipping on a latte, was his dear friend, Mo.”

I also found myself weaving description into essays:

“As the Director of Market Research, I have traveled to Shanghai, China and New Delhi, India to explore the best avenues and options for TSI expansion. As noted in my reports to Frank Dirren, Senior Vice President of Business Development, both markets have strong potential for profitable growth. In fact, in comparing the advantages and disadvantages of these markets, my recommendation for one over the other is slight but confident.”

Whether engaged in creative writing, exposed to new technologies, inspired by global issues, or having experienced spiritual and personal awareness, the MALS program has changed me. I am more confident, enlightened, prepared, determined and encouraged. I aspire to be a better person, global citizen, humanitarian, teacher and mother. I yearn to continue my educational journey through auditing more MALS classes and considering another advanced degree. I am stronger emotionally, intellectually and spiritually because of this program. I credit UNCG for allowing me to experience a personal renewal. The professors were thoughtful, constructive, honest, and visionary. This journey was more than I had expected, and I will forever be a loyal graduate of this University.