

Expanding Viewpoints

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UNCG MALS Reflection Essay

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When I graduated from Michigan State University with a B.A. in journalism in 2007, I assumed I was done with school. I had put in my four years, taken the right classes and had gotten the degree that everyone (including myself) expected I would. I figured from there I would move off into a career that would utilize the skills I learned while in school. That did indeed happen and four years after graduating, I found myself working as a communication coordinator for a non-profit organization and using my journalistic skills to write press releases, take photographs and produce an annual report. Although I was busy and my job was interesting, something felt missing and I often began thinking about broadening my skill set and learning new things. I wasn't clear as to what this was just yet until one day I received a pamphlet in the mail (I think it was intended to be for the last person who lived at my rental home). The pamphlet was for UNCG's MALS Program and listed the classes that would be taking place that semester.

For no apparent reason, I began reading through the list of classes, and found myself becoming excited about these courses. I remember thinking this program seemed to be extremely unique in the sense that what it offered wasn't a master's degree, but an experience; an experience to delve into the world on another level, to explore other cultures and societies and to deepen my sense of understanding about other governments, different religions, and beliefs unlike mine.

Following graduation from Michigan State University in 2007, my first job out of school was working as a news reporter for my hometown newspaper, The Harbor Light. On my first day of work, my editor informed me that to be a good reporter was to be a curious person. He explained this meant I should strive to be curious about other people, places, beliefs and ideas in order to better understand the world, which would lead me to become a more effective writer.

This advice has never left me, and when I decided to apply for the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program at UNCG, I thought what better way to become a more informed writer (and individual, overall) than to learn about the world around me in greater detail.

The funny thing is, that I wasn't necessarily looking to attend graduate school when I found out about the MALS program, but upon learning about it, it seemed like it would be a good fit for me, and over the last year during my time in the program, it has.

I think the most important thing this program has given me is a better understanding of the world and society as a whole. While all of my classes have been extremely interesting and informative, some have stood out in terms of expanding my knowledge of the world around me.

One class I found to be particularly thought provoking was a course I took with Ann Saab called Current Problems in the Middle East. I think often when we do not fully understand a specific culture, idea or belief, we have a difficult time relating with it. This seems to be the case of how many people feel about the Middle East. Like others, I could not understand the region, and therefore had several misconceptions about it. The U.S. has also had so much involvement there and the region has received much negative press in America, it's difficult to have a truly unbiased view of the area without learning more about it. This class explored Middle Eastern history, values and culture, which personally gave me more insight into why this region of the world is the way it is. One very helpful topic discussed in the course was the reasoning behind the conflict between Israelis and Arabs. Growing up, I remember periodically hearing about the conflict between these two groups of people, in addition to bombings that would take place, as well. An assignment in Professor Saab's course helped me to gain some knowledge in this area by reading a short story called, "The Swimming Contest," and the lecture that accompanied it.

Through it, I learned that Arabs felt that their land was invaded by Israelis, who in turn felt that they were simply returning to their homeland. Tensions worsened when the U.N. helped to develop an integrated state of Israel, something the Jewish people accepted, but Arabs did not, leading to the War of Liberation, in which many Arabs fled to nearby states, leading them to feel as if they were refugees. Understanding the history of these two groups has definitely given me a better perspective of their current issues.

Another course I took by Professor Saab, *The Contemporary World*, also helped me gain understanding about the Middle East. "The Attack," by Yasmina Khadra, tells the story of well-known and respected Arab surgeon Amin, and his wife, Sihem, who are living in Israel. In the story, Sihem is a suicide bomber who kills herself and 17 other people in a crowded marketplace one day. Following this, Amin struggles with his wife's actions and tries to understand what drove her to do what she did. While the book does not condone the actions of this woman, it explains the controversy between the Israelis and Palestinians, and the feeling of hopelessness many Arabs felt at trying to regain their land. This was an interesting perspective, and one that gave some additional insight into the problems between these two groups in the Middle East. By examining both groups of people and why they feel as they do, it's easier to gain a better understanding of the conflict as a whole.

Learning about other cultures and people is an important component to understanding the world, as is understanding how world governments and economies merge in this modern day age of globalization. *Emerging Powers*, a course I took with William Hamilton, allowed me to gain some valuable knowledge about the inner-workings of up and coming world powers. It also showed me how these contribute to the world economy and also explored the U.S.'s role as the main world superpower for the last half of the century. Prior to this class, I had little

understanding of the effect that emerging powers are having on the world. Perhaps one of the most interesting and practical assignments I had in this course dealt with exploring the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations, all newly industrialized countries that are currently changing the global economy. In this assignment, I researched the history of the USD, how this is affecting trade with other countries who are becoming leery of the de-valuation of the dollar, and the potential for a new international currency or one developing within the BRICS nations. From a journalistic standpoint, this class was invaluable. In my current job as a newspaper editor, I don't typically write about world economies or global powers, however, to understand these concepts is to have a better understanding of the world, which helps me to be a better writer.

Another one of Professor Hamilton's courses I found to be particularly thought provoking was Global Human Rights. The course investigated several human rights violations that have/are taking place in the U.S. and internationally, including sex trafficking in Thailand, the use of child soldiers in Sri Lanka and violations following Hurricane Katrina in the U.S. This course was an eye opener, to say the least. Like other classes, it gave me a better understanding of the world, but it also taught empathy for others. In particular, one assignment that required us to research sex trafficking (often of girls as young as 10 or 11), I found to be extremely devastating. I think we often become wrapped up in our own world with issues and problems that are pertinent to only ourselves and we forget about what other people are experiencing elsewhere. I don't think it's too far to say that this class had a truly emotional effect on me. Several times throughout my research for this class I found myself in tears, reading about some of the horrific things that people have to endure due to basic human rights violations. I think courses like this are important because it forces us to look at the world through the eyes of someone else who might

not have as many advantages as we do. I believe it also causes us to appreciate what we have. I can say with great certainty that no matter the kind of bad day I'm having, at least I've not been taken away from my family and been forced to work as a sex slave in another country and possibly be killed if I tried to escape. Classes and assignments such as this help to put our lives in perspective, and maybe in the some cases, motivate some to take action against these offenses.

I've heard many times that if you want to understand another culture, look at their visual culture; their art. *Global Arts: Windows into the Hearts of Other Cultures* taught by Larry Lavender, was one such class that helped me do so. In particular, an assignment we received encouraged us to look at *Kyōgen*, a humorous, theatrical art form found in Japan. We were to watch two traditional plays in this form and to follow up the assignment with discussion among our classmates, which garnered some interesting responses. I had not previously been exposed to an art form such as this, and initially it was difficult for me to fully appreciate it, and many of my classmates had similar reactions. However, upon reading more about the art form and beginning to understand it better, I was able to appreciate more fully and in turn, learn a bit more about Japanese culture. It was perhaps easier to understand this art form when my classmates and I began making connection between this and sitcoms in the U.S.; this came to show that humor in one country isn't too terribly different from comedy in another. In order to understand a particular people, you must understand their culture and art is a huge part of such, and this assignment was an interesting way to go about this.

Additionally, *Global Perspectives in Biology*, taught by Janne Cannon was a class that also helped me gain a better grasp of the world, in a uniquely scientific sort of way. The course dealt with the history and present day issues of infectious diseases, which was incredibly fascinating. My final project for the course involved extensive research on a well-known

infectious disease, Polio. Through this project, I studied the history of the disease and also modern day implications of it. It was interesting to find out that a disease such as this, one that has been virtually eradicated in the Western world, is still a huge source of concern in developing countries such as Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan. This research led me to gain a better understanding of these countries' health challenges and like the other courses in this program, to develop a better perspective of a particular region of the world and its people, overall.

Though I am only sharing a brief summary of what I learned while in the MALS program, I can honestly say that every one of my classes was incredibly valuable, thought-provoking and informative. Lately, I've found myself paying more attention to current events and world news. I not only find myself more interested in this, but I'm actually much better able to understand what is taking place. This is a direct result of the MALS courses I have taken that have allowed me to gain a broader view of the world and increased my understanding of the cultures and people in it.

For someone who was sure I was done with my education following my undergrad degree, I couldn't be more surprised and pleased with my experience in the MALS program. I currently work as a newspaper editor and I've found becoming more aware (and interested) in the world around me has helped me to not only to become a better writer and editor overall, but a more informed and well-rounded individual. Had I not completed the MALS program, I would most likely still have my current job, and probably perform it well, but I'm quite sure that this program has awakened that curiosity that I was encouraged to explore during my first newspaper job so many years ago. It has done this by expanding my view of the world beyond my immediate surroundings and has helped me gain perspective, empathy and knowledge of other

people and ideas. Due to this program, I find myself with a renewed love of learning, exploring and understanding. It has renewed that sense of curiosity that benefits all of us in leading an informative, fulfilling life and will be something that will stick with me for the rest of my life.