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HUMN697 Capstone Portfolio

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Exploring Ideas: Discovering Who I Am - A Reflection on Learning and Growth

Personal Reflection Essay

Looking back on my journey through the Master of Arts in Humanities program, I can honestly say it has been a transformative experience. When I started, I knew I was curious and eager to learn, but I was not entirely confident in my abilities as a scholar. In fact, I referred to myself as “an unlikely scholar.” Now, looking back, I see how I have grown — both in my academic skills and understanding of myself.

I remember being excited and nervous as I researched graduate programs. I was unsure what graduate school entailed, if I would be accepted into the program, or if I was really up for the challenge. I am a first-generation college graduate and really had no role models to emulate. I loved learning about various cultures and reading historical narratives, but I often saw myself as more of a “doer” than a writer. The coursework challenged me to think critically, connect ideas, and express myself clearly. From the first course, HUMN500 Humanities: Research, Study, and Use, I was hooked! I excitedly bought Adler and Van Doren’s *How to Read a Book*, thinking it was a rudimentary topic for a graduate-level course. How wrong I was! I have since given away several copies of that book as gifts. One change I have experienced because of this program is the way I digest material. Previously, I skimmed written works—catching only the highlights and missing the essential nuances of the content and writing style. I now actively identify an author’s intent, critically analyze their work, and assess whether their intended message is effectively conveyed.

As for writing, I spent 20+ years writing for business, primarily about regulatory issues—Very dry, factful government documents. Tackling my first seven-page paper seemed an insurmountable task. I was proficient at reiterating facts from an investigation, and this was not that. I had to digest, analyze, and form opinions on the course materials and then write about my thoughts—in a way that contributed original insights and challenged existing ideas to extend the conversation within scholarly studies. Fortunately, this became easier as I progressed through the curriculum. I never anticipated how often I would revisit these papers to revise and improve the content.

Throughout my Master's journey in Humanities, I have cultivated both a broad understanding of diverse cultural, historical, and philosophical concepts and a deeper specialization in areas that resonate most with my interests. For example, my research on Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* allowed me to explore Enlightenment ideas and their impact on modern political thought, while my study of Buddhist and Christian rituals provided insight into how spiritual traditions shape cultural identity and social values. Engaging with complex texts, theories, and interdisciplinary ideas has expanded my intellectual toolkit, allowing me to analyze cultures, societal structures, and human behaviors through multiple lenses. I have developed the ability to apply significant theories to real-world contexts, strengthening my critical thinking and analytical skills. For instance, I examined many theoretical approaches, including the Socratic method to deepen critical inquiry, Rationalism to emphasize reason as a path to knowledge, Social Contract Theory to explore the balance between individual rights and societal obligations, and Renaissance Humanism to appreciate the power of human potential and cultural expression.

The growth I experienced was not immediate; it required sustained effort, reflection, and a willingness to challenge my own assumptions about learning and knowledge. Early in my

academic journey, I believed that understanding a subject meant simply summarizing material or memorizing key points. Over time, I realized that true engagement requires more—critical thinking, questioning established ideas, and connecting theory to real-world experiences. I learned to approach texts as collections of facts and conversations shaped by intention, context, and interpretation. This shift — from passive learning to active inquiry — has been pivotal in enhancing my academic work and preparing me for thoughtful engagement in both scholarly and professional settings.

Developing my thesis, “Exploring Biologically Sound Environments for Extraterrestrial Life: Potential Environments, Communication, and Risks,” was pivotal. It pushed me to combine scientific concepts with humanistic inquiry, showing that I could contribute meaningful insights. Working on my Renaissance paper built that confidence further, helping me connect historical concepts with modern ideas about growth and fulfillment. With each step in my academic journey, I received essential resources and thoughtful guidance, which supported my growth toward becoming a confident scholar. I was encouraged to challenge ideas, which initially felt intimidating but ultimately strengthened my confidence in forming original insights. Good was seldom good enough. I was pushed to refine my arguments and add more supporting evidence to my work, which was sometimes overwhelming but sharpened my ability to engage with complex ideas. I was encouraged to step back, sit with my uncertainty, and allow it to unfold naturally rather than rushing to find immediate answers. This may have been the best lesson because the answers sometimes reveal themselves with fresh eyes and a rested mind. My frustration, anxiety, and self-doubt were gradually replaced by excitement and pride. My intellectual growth is a work in progress. Still, with the tools provided by my graduate education of a Master of Arts in Humanities at APUS, I can continue down a logical path toward that never-ending goal.

The multimedia projects required by the MA Humanities program have helped to develop skills across many facets. Previously, I was competent in using Microsoft PowerPoint for slide presentations. I had not explored the options of video or sound, which significantly elevated the presentations. I used Prezi for a HUMN555 19th Century Romantic and Industrial Revolution presentation. I found it suitable for the task, but my subscription expired, and I chose to use PowerPoint for my Capstone Portfolio multimedia assignment. PowerPoint is user-friendly, with many tips to guide you through whatever project you are tackling.

For the actual portfolio, I tried to use Canvas Portfolium but encountered problems with it changing the formatting of my artifacts. Even when I converted the Word documents to PDFs and uploaded them, the pagination changed, so the documents were no longer correct for the MLA format. I contacted technical support, but the issue was never resolved. I pivoted and decided to dust off and enhance my blog on WIX to incorporate my scholastic work in a portfolio section. I'm so glad I did! Although I haven't written any new personal blog posts, I will add new material soon. I learned a great deal about website creation, and the final product is what I envisioned when I began this assignment. This site is visually appealing, easy to navigate, and full of intriguing information.

When I began the MA Humanities program, I aimed to challenge myself intellectually and explore subjects I loved. While I still have those goals, I am compelled to share what I have learned. Through writing, speaking, or mentoring, I want to connect with others and spark conversations about culture, society, and human potential. My Capstone project, which blends academic research with creative storytelling, reflects this shift — reinforcing that scholarly work can be engaging and accessible.

This program has significantly reshaped my post-retirement plans, transforming what initially began as a personal enrichment pursuit into a launching point for ongoing growth and re-entry into the workforce. I now envision volunteering with cultural institutions and pursuing part-time remote work focused on the evolution of artificial intelligence. The research, writing, and digital presentation skills I have gained through this experience have empowered me to effectively connect with others and meaningfully contribute to the rapidly evolving field of synthetic intelligence.

As I reflect on this journey, I am grateful for the support and guidance I received along the way. I would especially like to thank Dr. Kathryn Broyles for her high standards, invaluable feedback, encouragement, and insights, which challenged me to think critically and develop my academic voice. Her mentorship played a significant role in shaping my growth throughout this Capstone. I am also deeply grateful to my wonderful husband, Doug. His patience, encouragement, and unwavering support have been the foundation of my growth, and I truly wouldn't be the person I am today without him.