

Narrative Essay

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Introduction

Personal experiences and events serve as the GPS for our successes and failures in life; each direction or decision we take shapes who we are as individuals. Not only do these moments influence who we are as people, but they also shape the identity we develop over time. We interpret these experiences by telling stories of our journeys from where we started to who we are today through the process of narrative identity. As individuals engage in this process, they begin to recognize that their experiences contribute to their growth. My unexpected journey from art to cybersecurity demonstrates this concept through a series of experiences and turning points that guided me towards this major at Old Dominion University.

The Artist Identity

Before stepping into the cybersecurity identity that I have today, I had a love for art. According to McAdams (2001), this illustrates thematic coherence, or the process of "identifying an overarching theme, principle, or gist that integrates different episodes" in one's life. In this case, the overall theme was art. This love began in the early stages of childhood. During my childhood, I had a creative, innovative mind that conjured up new creations. As a self-taught artist, I had a desire to learn everything, including how to create characters, draw backgrounds, and develop beginner-level artistic techniques. From this desire, I was able to execute these skills by creating comic books, original characters, and writing stories. Over time, I looked up to numerous artists, especially those on YouTube. Drawing inspiration from their art styles, I crafted my own, one shaped by my personality.

My passion for art continued throughout middle school and high school, where I was introduced to other art forms and new opportunities. In middle school, I took art courses that

introduced me to other forms of art, such as perspective drawings, self-portraits, and character concepts. In high school, I was introduced to a new opportunity: becoming an art scholar in the Art Scholars Program. This program was for art students who wanted to take their skills to another level. It involved numerous drawing exercises, such as still-lives, collages, scratchboard, working with oil pastels, and working with acrylic paint. The program also involved learning about art history, allowing me to study the evolution of art periods, the legacy of art masters, and the variety of paintings and sculptures they created around the world. These courses allowed me to experiment with numerous art methods and techniques while continuing to shape my art style, skills, and creativity. Throughout these experiences, I didn't see art as a hobby anymore, but as something precious to me and a potential career and major.

Questioning My Path

As McAdams (2001) states, the narratives of our lives give us a sense of guidance and clarity, and during that period, my narrative was shaped around the goal of becoming a professional artist. However, this narrative took an unexpected plot twist. During COVID, in my junior year of high school, I advanced to Advanced Placement Art 2D and Elements (or AP Art 2D Elements for short). This course involved heavier art principles such as texture, values, lighting, color theory, etc. It also required us to choose a theme to guide our artworks. Throughout my time in that class, I spent countless hours on drawing compositions, sketching final art pieces, and painting them just to make sure I met the expectations of those specific principles. I also had to make sure I captured the symbolism and meaning behind each artwork I painted. Although this process and work were time-consuming, it helped me to understand the importance of commitment and discipline when sharpening my skills. I also enjoyed learning about how I could approach my art pieces from different angles and styles to convey a specific

message. However, as the workload had grown, I began to experience what Smith (2017) described as a contamination story, in which “people interpret their lives as going from good to bad”.

The passion I had for art that shaped my identity was slowly slipping away due to the dread of being burnt out by deadlines and expectations. Throughout the countless hours of working on compositions and painting, I also had to make sure my unfinished compositions were prepared for the feedback from my peers and teacher. This involved putting together pictures of each sketch and documenting the process of creating the final piece. Additionally, meeting the deadlines for both feedback and submission of final pieces had taken the joy out of creating art for fun. The overall experience began to feel more challenging as the periods of demotivation and creative block started to occur more frequently, eventually causing burnout that made me change my focus to something more sustainable and exciting.

Stepping Into the Cybersecurity Identity

When I completed the AP course, I was considering my next steps, such as choosing my major and career before graduating from high school, especially since burnout had affected my passion for art. This didn't fully happen until my senior year of high school. In my senior year, I took an elective course called Introduction to Cybersecurity, which gave an overview of the concepts and principles of cybersecurity. At first, I thought this course would be boring, but it turned out to be interesting and fun. I gained a little bit of hands-on experience in creating databases and learning how to navigate through them by using commands like “SELECT” or “SELECT * FROM”. Although it was a little challenging, taking the time to learn where I went wrong helped me realize I liked the process of problem-solving. The success of running a SQL query provided a small sense of achievement and excitement that I had never felt before. There

were other hands-on exercises, such as hacking into a mock website using SQL injection, moving files in a command-line terminal, and testing password strengths, which increased my curiosity in cybersecurity. Not only did this course provide strictly hands-on exercises, but it also taught me the importance of frameworks and policies that help us to stay protected from malicious actors, with the addition of methods to keep our data and digital footprint safe.

As the semester progressed, my curiosity about cybersecurity went beyond the classroom, leading me to take notes and test the things I've learned from the class at home. I began practicing with testing commands like "ping" or "cd.." within my computer's command line interface to get a feel and an idea of how I might utilize them in the future. When I graduated from high school, I was debating my major before going into college, whether I should try art again or step into a new identity of becoming a cybersecurity major. With art, I didn't want to give it up completely due to the burnout; however, with cybersecurity, the overall field was what drew me in. This decision marked the beginning of what Smith (2017) describes as a redemption story, where "stories transition from bad to good". In my case, the contamination was the overall burnout from art; however, later it turned out to be a positive outcome (the redemption), opening another door that introduced me to cybersecurity. When I found out that Old Dominion University was best known for its cybersecurity program, I knew it was the right place for me to finalize my choice and enroll there, as it provided the foundation I needed to turn my curiosity into a career.

The Path Ahead

Reflecting on my journey from a dedicated art student to a cybersecurity student, I can see how each experience shaped who I am today. Although the transition was difficult at first, it led me to a better position that challenged me in ways that allowed me to grow academically and

personally. As Nguyen (2013) suggests, reflecting on experiences can help students recognize their capabilities and skills that they haven't discovered before. With cybersecurity, I discovered I was good at technical problem-solving and analytical thinking. Taking courses such as Ethical Hacking, Cybersecurity Techniques and Operations, Database Concepts, and Introduction to Biocybersecurity at Old Dominion University has sharpened these skills while providing evidence of this growth. My e-portfolio showcases these skills through technical projects and research, along with other projects I've completed. As I continue my education at Old Dominion University, I will cherish the creativity from art and carry the problem-solving skills that I've gained from cybersecurity in my future career.

References

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