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Summer Professional Training Write-up

This summer I got the opportunity to write for the Zingerman's marketing team. This opportunity was identified and generously funded by the English department. The following is my reflection on the experience:

For this project I spent most of my time scheduling, conducting, and transcribing interviews with local chefs business owners—as well as a couple phone interviews with people out of town. In the interviews, we discussed the subjects' backgrounds, their experiences working in the food industry, their time at Zingerman's, and their current culinary and business ventures. I really enjoyed speaking to people about their work, and get in the mindset of focusing on the artistry of food and drink. These people were all incredibly passionate about what they do, and dedicated to the people they work with, which made interviewing them quite inspiring.

Most of my time as an English graduate student is spent talking to people who, like me, are experts—or at least budding experts!—in literature. In these interviews, it was interesting and challenging to engage with people who are experts in something completely different: an area in which I am of course a consumer, but never a creator or a stakeholder. I tried to take the Terry Gross advice: “don’t be a smarty, be a dummy.” That is not easy for someone training as an academic, in which the best thing is usually to “play a smarty,” for better or for worse.¹ In this way, the process of interviewing and writing was an exercise in humility. That said, preparing and conducting the interviews reminded me a lot of lesson-planning and discussion-leading. In both interviews and class discussions, there is a delicate balance between hitting the points you want to hit, and reading the other individual and the dynamic in the room. When I worked on my high school newspaper, I used to always be so nervous about interviews that I would intentionally find editing and writing work that would allow me to avoid them. I think that the experience of being a GSI for the last two years has actually helped to make these interviews less nerve-wracking.

When it came to writing, I was surprised at how challenging it was to compose the article about Zingermans' alums and their accomplishments since they worked there. I think this is in part because I realized that one could conceivably write an entire article about any of the individual interview subjects based off of the stories and the quotes that they gave me. I was sort of shocked, as I began drafting, at just how few words from each of them would end up in the final product! Another challenge was how to structure the piece once I'd come to terms with this. The truth is that I went into the job knowing what the lede or thesis of the piece was going to be: that Zingerman's has changed the food landscape of Ann Arbor, not only through

¹ I heard Ira Glass say this once, and now cannot find any record of it online. It might be apocryphal, but it still seems like sage enough advice.

the deli and the Community of Businesses, but also through the local businesses of entrepreneurs who got their start with Zingerman's. Rather than begin researching, writing, and then seeking an argument, I had to find a way to use all of the raw material I had to illustrate my pre-existing point, and to make it interesting to read while I did it. This challenge touches on the kernel of why this sort of writing work is different than the kind of work I usually do. I could be cynical and say that it is inherently less intellectually stimulating or creative to work this way, but the truth is that I think it was just a different kind of challenge, a different kind of puzzle to solve as I tried to tell a story or illustrate a phenomenon, and to do so ethically.

I went into this process anticipating that this would be an opportunity to try out a new kind of workplace or management relationship. It was not quite what I was expecting (I think, honestly, that they were very very busy and sort of just let me do as I wished). This was more of a "freelance" experience, and did not really entail being managed or edited at all. This is by no means a complaint. I mean, rather, to suggest that the experience of writing for the marketing department was a lot more similar to writing a seminar paper or a prospectus, involving self-motivation, organization, and pacing, which I like. I'm very glad that I got the opportunity to write in this different context and environment.