

**Final Reflection on My 2021 Summer Enrichment Experience
at the University of Chicago Pre-College Immersion Program**
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With the support of the Garwin Family Foundation, this summer I participated in an intensive three-week online program “at” the University of Chicago. The course, “Collegiate Writing: Awakening into Consciousness”, was *very* rigorous, and in class we considered the intersection of philosophy and literature, writing weekly essays dissecting and analyzing various texts.

Asynchronous work!

My summer course kept me incredibly busy. Each week we focused on a different facet of argumentative, academic writing. Week one of the course was spent learning about forming a nuanced claim, week two was spent examining discourse and flow, and in week three we learned how to properly develop introductions and conclusions. Each day we watched a writing lecture recorded by our instructor, Michael Subialka, on our “concept of focus” during the day and completed an accompanying assignment. Some days we had short free-response quizzes after watching the video, often “how would you change this to make it better” types of questions, but most days we collaborated in small groups asynchronously.

My class was made up of about twenty people total, and we were split into small groups of four. We would receive prompts along with our lectures and post our responses to our small group discussion thread. Some prompts were “edit this paragraph”, but others asked us to write close reading paragraphs, draft claims, and even entire introductory paragraphs. After we posted our writings in our discussion group, we would check the thread periodically throughout the day and respond to our group mate’s answers with constructive criticism—advice on structure, clarity, and depth instead of small grammatical mistakes. I absolutely adored my group mates and they “killed it” on the constructive criticism. I adored how this collaborative aspect was built into my class, even remotely.

Aside from the daily lectures and corresponding homework, each week we read a different piece of literature discussing a different form of consciousness. Our first week we focused on religious/spiritual awakenings, reading the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a part of the Hindu epic (possibly the longest epic in human history), the *Mahabharata*. The second week we read T.S. Eliot’s delightfully dense *Four Quartets*, with a focus on the relationship between history and consciousness. During week three, we studied sociopolitical awakenings, reading excerpts from *If They Come in the Morning*, a collection of essays edited by activist Angela Y. Davis from Marin County Jail in 1971. Each week we *also* wrote a text-based argumentative essay analyzing each piece that became progressively longer (Paper 1 was 3 pages, Paper 2 was 4 pages, and Paper 3 was 5 pages).

Synchronous classes!

About half of the students in my class live in China, so to better accommodate for them, the University of Chicago scheduled my class for 6-8pm each weekday. We spent the first half-hour of class everyday listening to presentations about something that relates to consciousness, and then participating in mini-discussions. And when I say (or type) “something,” I mean “anything”. During our first week Subialka gave our daily mini-presentations, showing us labyrinths, mandalas, Whirling Dervishes, La Sagrada Familia, and a meditation video, and we examined how each subject related to consciousness (that was religious consciousness week).

Halfway through week one, we sent in presentation proposals. For the remaining two weeks, two or three of us would give 10-15 minute presentations and mediate short discussions on our topic of choice (provided it was “green lit” by our instructor). I presented on Monday of week two, which was great. I like going first in presentations, because I always get really nervous and psych myself out when I have to go later. I presented Whitman’s poem “When I Heard The Learn’d Astronomer”, examining how mystery and knowledge affect beauty. Other students presented on tourism and travel, feminism, Beethoven’s 5th symphony (not the entire thing, of course, but sections of it), Plato’s *Apologia Socratis*, and an interactive door in the Cleveland Botanical Gardens.

Our short presentations would often run beyond the allotted period and we often ended around 7:50pm. After those were done, we’d take a short break and then return to class to discuss the readings we had been assigned for the day. I *really love* class discussions. I always feel so enriched after them. Each discussion was filled with personal opinions, favorite lines, and comments on structure (because we read a fair amount poetry), audience, and everything else we thought was interesting. Our synchronous classes were fantastic.

We were also put into seminar groups of four or five (which are different from our daily discussion groups). Each Thursday, we submitted a (very) rough draft before class by “copy-pasting” it to a Google document shared between the seminar group members and our writing instructor, Sarah Bonnano. We read our group mate’s essays, providing specific constructive criticism. We were also assigned to be respondent 1 or 2 for some of our group mates, which came with some extra tasks, often relating to what writing skill we’d been focusing on that week (for example, in week two when we studied discourse structure and cohesiveness, respondent 1 would highlight each part of the claim and list what they think would need to be substantiated in the paper, and respondent two would go through the body paragraphs highlighting key words or phrases). After class on Thursday and for however much time we had on Friday morning, we would read and review those papers. Then, the seminar group would meet in a Zoom (my group met from 12:30-1:30pm) and go through each paper. We were a bit pressed for time in our third week. Our classes ended on a Thursday, so we had to turn in our third (and longest) draft a day earlier than normal.

I think the seminars were probably the highlight of each week, partly because of the advice, but mainly because my seminar group mates were so cool (You may notice a running theme of me thinking my classmates are awesome, and that’s because they all are).

Outside of Class :D (and interpersonal relationships)

Our “out-of-class” activities were far more relaxed than my synchronous and asynchronous work for class. We were put into virtual “houses” with a bunch of other students in different classes and we had “community leaders”. I was in the Medici House. It essentially operated like a “floor group” if we lived in a dorm, except it was mixed gender. We essentially just met once a week on Zoom and played ice breaker games for about half-an-hour. The meetings were always scheduled for 8pm, and I was always late because my class would almost always run a bit long. While as a group we were pretty inactive, we were able to message other students through the platform we used, called Wisr. I messaged 30 of the 40 people in my house and most responded back! Now that our courses have finished we’ve moved from Wisr to Snapchat or Insta.

I became friends with many of my classmates, too. Because we spent so much time talking in class (albeit about literature) it was much easier to feel comfortable reaching out. Also, our instructor had us post intro videos to a big discussion thread before the course started, both so we could get to know each other and also to make sure we were comfortable using the posting and commenting features of Canvas (which is the system we used for class).

Final Thoughts

I really adored my summer course at the University of Chicago. The pieces we read for the course were fascinating, and the discussion-based classes allowed me to get to know my classmates well, even though we were all at home. Along with participating in enriching discussions and fledging friendships, I learned so many new writing skills. I know “writing” is in the name of the course, but it was still *a lot* more writing that I anticipated, and I plan to fully utilize everything I’ve learned this summer to absolutely *crush* every literature analysis paper I have this year in English. I think beyond learning immediately applicable skills, I’ve learned a lot more about revision, and leaving time for revision, especially.

Because we had to turn in our drafts within 4 days of receiving our prompt, I learned to spend time writing everyday instead of putting it off until the night before (which was the story of almost every essay I wrote this last year...). Collegiate Writing: Awakening into Consciousness was also *very* collaboration heavy, and I’m now a lot better at finding places in essays that can be improved upon and giving constructive criticism. The structure of my course translated excellently to the online format, and although we did miss out on a few things while stuck at home (including a trip to the Oriental Institute), my summer class at the University of Chicago was enriching, intense, and absolutely wonderful.

I feel like I stepped away from the class with a host of new friendships and knowledge on collaboration and writing that can be applicable in all fields of study, and I really want to thank the Garwin Family Foundation for giving me the opportunity to take this summer course.