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# Coming into Understanding

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# Coming into Understanding



Picture Taken By: Myka Menard

**By: Myka Menard**

**Creative Project: Poetry**

**Prof. Jennifer Fletcher**

**Spring 2017**

**Title: Coming into Understanding**

**By: Myka Menard**

**Senior Capstone**

**Creative project**

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# Project Proposal

1. My name is Myka Menard and I am a Human Communications Major with a concentration of Creative Writing and Social Action.
2. I am hoping to pull together a collection of poems that focus of my experience with Developmentally Disabled adults, starting with how I was introduced. I want to layer the poems in a story like fashion. I want to start out by tying my service learning class and then later about my experiences as an actual employee. Often people will see a child with down syndrome and react somewhat pleasantly. That same person might see an adult with the same disorder and feel uncomfortable and not react so pleasantly. This was at least the case for me.
3. This semester's theme is stories, and this is a story I don't think many hear. Also, by placing it as my story I believe I can make it easier to understand their stories. I don't think I can ever understand my clients' stories to the point that I can relate, but I can allow others to hear my story and maybe fall in love with the clients just like I have.
4. The purpose of my project is to create understanding. I want the woman working at Walmart to engage my client and not me standing behind them while they are being rung up. I want more people to reply "hello" when one of my clients, who is ignored at least half the time tries to be polite and say "Hi". I want people to attempt to reach outside their comfort zones, and experience lives of those around them.
5. My format is intended to take readers through the stages of my development. I want readers to understand that the discomfort is real, it is there for everyone, but it is easily overcome. I want to show them that they can learn to love, interact, and just simply wave at adults with disabilities.

6. The title as it stands know “What I Wish I Knew”, or “We can Come Together”, or “Path to Understanding,” but I think I like something a little simpler “Understanding”.
7. The first poem would be about my service learning class and being introduced to a site. The second poem I would like to share my first experiences at the site and how uncomfortable it was for me. The next several poems I would like to reflect upon several of the clients I have met and how I saw them then versus how I see them now. The climax poem will be all about the injustices I have seen them face and why understanding is necessary. Following that I will write about one client who is hard to handle, I want to talk about her to show how misunderstanding can lead to many more problems. My last and Final poem I hope to create is a call to action. The call to action will cover why loving, and caring for these individuals is important for both them and us.
8. My expectation is that at the end of the reader experience with my collection they will feel compelled to go out and be more readily willing to engage people with developmental disabilities. I expect to have fully delivered my experiences to the best of my ability my experiences while introducing images of the clients lives as well. Many of the clients are conserved meaning I cannot write about them without written permission. However, I am able to send permission slips home (as I have done in the past) to have signed by their legal guardians.
9. I have taken several creative writing classes including; multicultural poetry, intro. Creative writing, Fiction and creative non-fiction writing, poetry writing workshop, and women’s writing workshop. In each of those classes I secured an A along with receiving great feedback the continuously made my work better. One of the skills I acquired through my service learning site was the ability to listen carefully in several different

ways. With some of the clients at the site I had to listen to non-verbal cues, in other instances I got the opportunity to use my limited knowledge of sign language. Lastly, there were/are clients that are almost impossible to understand if you don't take the time to really listen to their words. However, my time at the site has allowed me to, for the most part, understand clients more through actively listening.

10. My next steps include writing two to three poems per week and then constantly reviewing them with the help of the creative writing staff available on campus. I will create permission forms to send home to several of the clients to make sure it is okay for me to write about them, those that come back with a "No" I must avoid names and personal things for privacy sake. I will try to spend even more time with clients and show them the poems I have written and receive their feedback as well.

11. Timeline:

(Feb 13-17) Send out permission forms.

(Feb 20-24) First three poems written and in workshop.

(Feb 27-March 3) Second three poems written and in workshop.

(March 6-10) Third set of three poems written and in workshop.

(March 13-17) Fourth set of three poems written and in workshop.

(March 20-31) Write reflective essay along with revising previous poems.

(mid to late April) Finish revision of poems.

(April 17-20) Write final synthesis essay.

# Service Learning

September

I must decide.  
my path  
in service learning,  
break through  
two new environments  
School being the first.  
“I want to work  
with disabled children.”  
Instead, I am  
directed to a new path,  
a new experience.  
Hope.  
My new environment  
connecting with disabled  
adults of all ages.  
I call,  
no response.  
I call again,  
nothing.  
Prof. Ritscher  
guides me towards  
a student, already connected,  
Lina connects me to Hope.  
Together we begin  
our own path  
to understanding.

October

The first day  
Creeps up out of busy  
schedule,  
surrounding me  
with strangers.  
Teeth smile at me,  
on oddly shaped faces.  
Hello's come in strange,  
some strained tones. I do not  
Know these odd individuals.



I trudge on  
in fear  
I didn't know I harbored.  
Why am I here?  
What use is my discomfort?  
I speak to kind staff.  
I speak to  
clients, equally kind,  
Looking for friendship.  
Yet, I distance myself.  
Uncomfortable.

### December

My service hours' end,  
But I continue to go.  
Over and over, whatever time  
I could muster. Seconds  
tick on the clock limiting time,  
pushing the time ever closer to  
the end. Time spent  
at Hope, I cherish like rubies  
in a greedy man's hands.  
I listen as Danny excitedly  
bursts out  
about sports, listen to  
Dave and Sara bicker,  
as siblings do.  
Perpetual questions,  
now memorized,  
I yearn to hear  
when I've been away,  
too long.

### January

Time must be limited,  
I need a job, time  
will be stolen  
for green necessity.  
Hope's time soon  
minimal, possibly  
Erased. Each client  
A ruby of love

in the treasure cove  
of my heart.  
Hope becomes  
my rare commodity.  
A retailer calls back but  
hours don't work.  
No other calls received,  
weeks go by, I place more  
applications. I need work.  
I joke,  
"Give me a job at Hope!"  
Nothing will come from  
this half joke.

February

Lina and I, two halves  
of a whole position.  
Two hearts meant  
to keep the rubies close,  
two bodies to show  
others their deep color,  
bright sparkle to fill  
a world too blind to  
see true beauty.  
Two part-timers  
filling a full-time slot.  
Our continued visits  
after service hours were up,  
allowed us to be brought in.  
Hope is my home,  
away from home.  
My treasure trove.  
The clients my jewels  
I wish to share  
with the world.  
Allow me to teach you  
what they taught me.

# Ethan

October

Brown eyes peer down at me  
smirking above a nose too big,  
or maybe it was that the eyes that are too  
small on the square face. The adolescent looking  
mustache moves as the man snickers,  
pointing at me. "You," comes a thick Spanish  
accent and then more chuckling. Tall with a back  
slightly hunched he chuckles, eyebrows  
raised, eyes wide, mouth now being covered  
with his hand. A scar reaches across his head  
adding to the ambiance of Halloween, this scar,  
all too real. It snakes from the center of his forehead  
to his right ear. Half Frankenstein's monster.  
Halloween dresses him in a cloak,  
white makeup over his face and black circles  
his eyes. In his mouth plastic teeth flashing out  
of thin lips. I do not know him and he frightens me.

November

Another staff tells me "You have to be careful  
some of our clients steal, especially him."  
She points at a man who stands towers over  
another client chuckling strangely,  
wearing a frightening smirk,  
same as the day I met him.  
I hide my bag behind the staff table, keep  
my phone in the depths of my pockets, leave my wallet in the  
car. Theft rings in my head. Thievery becoming his  
single story, the only one I allowed myself to see.

February

Forgetting, my phone rested on the table, I walk  
away. He stalks towards it, pick it up, unseen.  
Then from behind me, he pokes my back. I turn  
confused, scared, unaware of what he wants.  
"Tu telephone!" reaching out his hand,  
laughing cheerfully, believing he had done good.

June

I love having him in my group, he doesn't speak  
much English but language isn't the only  
means to understanding.  
He laughs happily every  
day. My phone often disappears only  
to reappear in his palm reaching out towards me.  
He craves attention, smiles when he receives  
it. He cherishes the staff that laugh with him.  
He does steal, from donations, from stores.  
Little things, a few dollars, broken phones.  
Unimportant, but important to him.  
Laugh with him, engage him and his hands are  
liberated. Ignore him and show distrust  
the sticky fingers reemerge.  
Watch closely, concern, and love.  
I do not think he knows why his hands  
move on their own, but he knows  
when someone takes the time to care.

# Dave

October

Eyes clouded over, choosing not to see the little they still can. Teeth often forgotten, untouched by the brush that wishes to clean them. Morning breath carries with it, diabetic weight. Laughs pierce the quiet causing creatures to jump. The sides of his mouth dirty, crusted with food while the corners of his eyes develop their own kind of dry cracking substance. Dirty glasses on a fifty-year-old man's face, old sweaters, not cleaned in weeks' clog his appointed locker.

December

Laughs grow on those who listen attentively. Those who joke around, who hear daily: "No money no honey!" or "You help me, I help you!" or when I hear my name as Monica daily. My name is not Monica, but unable to pronounce a four-letter name it turns anew, spoken into Monica. A year later I still respond to Monica, even while not in your presence. I tell you, as I pick you up for program, "No front seat if you don't brush your teeth!"

February

I hug you, tickle you with my words. I want to make you laugh, to tell me "you're a funny lady." Then half squeak, half laugh you startle those,

unexpected it's loud  
prowess. Sometimes you still  
forget to liberate your mouth  
from the germs of the night.  
I still get you, but not because of  
smell. I get on you because I've honestly,  
come to care. You still choose to be  
blind to the world, not use the red  
and white cane to guide yourself.  
Instead running into doors, railings, walls  
intentionally, to make others laugh.  
To you, laughter, all laughter,  
makes up the world.  
Your laughter broadened  
mine.

# Sara

October

White teeth popped out into dentures,  
saliva cascading from pink plastic to  
pink flesh in the mouth.  
Eyes clouded over, seeing something  
no one else can see. Failing to see what others  
can. She keeps her walking cane folded up,  
stretching her arm out instead  
false teeth bitten down nails to mere  
stubs on fingers. Nose craning down,  
she laughs at others, no care for how  
they feel. She grumbles around about  
everything.

November

She loves cats, and  
chips and dogs.  
she repeats stories of them,  
over and over. She won't eat  
vegetables and still takes her teeth  
out. When we venture to Walmart  
she pulls out her money and  
claims a bag of chips for  
herself. She will not share,  
it is not in her nature.

January

She learned I have a dog. Next day,  
"Myka, look!" she yells waving  
then slowly from her sleeve  
emerges the fall colored stripes  
of a little dog sweater.  
stolen from her own little dog.  
A "Christmas present!"  
Now every day she pesters  
"Where's the sweater?"  
"He wearing it?"  
"It fits?"

I always tell her yes,  
and she laughs while hands  
come together in a clap.  
Nose crinkled and teeth bursting out  
unhinged by the sudden openness  
of a happy mouth, push outwards  
through an excited laugh.

March

I come up behind her,  
she sits laying her head  
on the table before her.  
I lean my head onto her  
back, carefully,  
silently, and await her  
to call my name. Await  
for her to sense it me.  
“Hey Myka!” She somehow,  
always knows.

April

She is talking to herself  
as she sits in the bathroom  
stall next to mine. I stay silent,  
I feel too exposed and wish to  
remain unnoticed.  
Out of know where she calls my  
name. She knows I’m there,  
I laugh thinking myself silly.  
she sees in a different way,  
and surprises me through the  
things she knows.

June

Her brother calls me Monica,  
she retaliates taking offence for me.  
She yells back “It’s Myka!”  
“Sara, that was mean.”  
I chide “You don’t need to yell.”  
Secretly I adore her effort.  
“I’m sorry...” she trails sadly.



apologizing to the fuzzy image  
that makes up her older  
brother. Ten years' difference  
both experience the same  
lives, the same disabilities, the same  
eyes that see more than we can.

# James

October

Blonde hair thinning at the center  
of an oval shaped head.  
Eyes chameleon blue,  
vibrant, straying to different sides  
of the room. The right follows movement  
the left stagnant, stuck in time.  
Wide mouth laid in constant  
smile. Teeth, mouse like, oversized  
white pearls. Everyone here loves  
him, yet few employees choose  
to work with him... Why?  
Questions unfold from his mouth,  
like a pent-up stream finally  
allowed to burst out.  
Rapid-fire repetition of questions  
with answers, he already knows.

December

His questions are ceaseless,  
I repeat them back.  
I become a parrot to his  
consistency, no longer answering  
more than once the questions:  
"What time I go home?"  
"2:02?"  
"Who takes me home?"  
"I'm with you all day?"  
"You come hang out at my house?"  
Over and over we cycle the questions  
back and forth. For him this is a game,  
he laughs, knowing his questions  
get under some of the staff's skin,  
maybe under all our skin after  
some time. I think this may, in fact,  
be his intention.

February

Wheelchair moving down  
the ramp installed just for him.  
Crippled hand, unable to bend  
at the knuckles, maneuvers  
knob, directing the motor.  
We weighed this chair once,  
subtracting the weight of  
it's resident.  
Brace yourself  
the questions are soon to come.  
Four-hundred pounds run over  
my toe as I begin to direct his chair,  
maneuvering it into the vehicle.  
Somehow unbroken  
we continue.

June

"What we do today?",  
"I'm with you today?"  
I peer down at his smiling face  
as one eye focuses on me.  
"James, can't you say  
good morning first?" I chastise  
lightly, laughing at our  
morning routine.  
"Oh," he whispers jutting  
his head around, taking in  
the surrounding of his front  
yard. He whispers again,  
"Morning," then loudly repeats,  
"I'm with you today?"  
I laugh, the ceaseless questions  
die down as I turn the radio dial  
up. His eyes get wide in the  
rearview mirror.  
Then we continue with our  
sacred morning ritual, belting  
songs together. Off key, wrongly  
worded we sing until we both  
arrive at program laughing.

# Jen

October

Drool drips out, onto the wheelchair that  
binds her. Slouched to one side  
water builds, swelling right cheek and arm.  
Food clings to untamed hair.  
Teeth yellowed,  
ageing her, wrinkles  
forming hard lines on her face.  
One eye hangs lazily  
away from reality.  
Polish on her nails chipped  
while cuticles caked with dried food.

December

She lashes out, untrimmed nails  
leaving marks on staff's arms. She smells  
of old, her chair perpetually dirty.  
We move her unwilling body  
and she mumbles what used to  
be profanity, now incomplete words,  
half spoken. She cannot understand  
we are here to help. "Sit up straight, please."  
trying to make it so her body can circulate. We  
brush her hair, only to receive her the next day  
hair untouched. Braids not brushed out  
becoming today's knots.

February

A staff tells me that she knows why  
anger flows out of claws and mumbled  
obscenities. She once was "Normal,"  
energetic child wanting  
to explore, learn to understand  
the world. A teenager who loved  
the water but crashed too hard upon  
it's surface while wakeboarding.  
Into the blue depths drowned  
the person she used to be,

where fish ate away her future hopes  
and dreams.

June

You can see the frustration that appears  
on her face, feel the pain she transmits  
through each new scratch she makes  
on those trying to help. Scratches  
make up the words she can't say.  
Forming the rhymes, she cannot  
make. Can you hear her  
screaming inside? Listen... listen...  
All rights of speech taken from her,  
no longer able to express through words.  
She can no longer reach for the sun,  
but daily she wishes to bask  
in its light. Free for just a moment,  
under the blue waves of the sky.

# Listen

Dan sits waiting  
wishing someone  
To talk about last night's  
game. He must wait  
until he finds the willingness.  
The veil of ignorance,  
to place yourself in  
shoes of others.  
What is your wish if born  
different?  
Would you talk to others  
Knowing you could have  
Been born in their shoes?  
Shed the discomfort.

Stigma defined:  
is negativity placed on others.  
Each of us has a stigma  
we wish to deconstruct.  
Break down into dust, to  
Scatter into oblivion.  
She drools because she  
can't help it but she  
loves attention, yoga,  
and her nails painted.  
Will you let the drool  
dissuade you?  
Inevitable ignorance  
breeds construction.

She walks blindly through  
stores, attached to the elbow  
of another. At check out she  
hands the money over but  
The cashier looks at  
the person she holds  
onto, fear in her eyes.  
As if the money itself  
is about to bite her.

Speak out against the

dark construction,  
boldly bestow truth onto  
the world. Break apart  
the fear that floods the  
overwhelming majority.  
There is another job that  
must be done. In order to  
be heard, we must first listen.  
Find others, tear down stigma  
together. Break down  
negative mentality. Uplift  
those the stigma breaks down.  
Stigma is not a person's  
single story, stigma blinds  
the populace of the truth  
behind made up lies.

Stigma is the wall that  
refuses to let truth  
penetrate the ear.  
Some are incapable of speaking  
up, against stigmas  
holding them captive.  
Incapable of defying their stigma's.  
Unable to scream out their truths,  
because the truth falls  
on self-clogged ears.  
To them you must show  
patience, time, and develop  
understanding.

# Reflection Essay

The theme for my capstone class this semester is storytelling. At first I thought of using it to tell the stories of the several individuals I work with at Hope Services. These individuals are developmentally disabled adults, many of whom are not capable of sharing their own stories. However, I decided to change my focus around. I still wanted to focus on the same individuals but through a different lens. I wanted to tell my story, and through it show how stigmas of society become ingrained in us without us realizing it.

My first poem goes over the time when I first entered Hope Services and how I was introduced through my service learning course. I went into it without giving it much thought other than the fact that I had worked with special needs children. When I arrived, I found myself beyond uncomfortable. I had brief experience with my second cousin who is developmentally disabled as a child, but I realized that I had never taken the chance to break the feeling of discomfort between us. My uncle was family but because society has taught us to be afraid of what we do not know, I was fearful. It didn't help that my grandmother was not very open towards him when we'd visit her sister.

However, Hope Services ended up demolishing that fear for me. The clients specifically created a new path to understanding. All it took was a bit of time for these individuals to steal my heart away. Since I have started working at Hope and taking the clients into the community I have seen a change in people's attitudes towards my clients. Some people still have the same fear in their eyes as I did while others have become very accepting and loving.

Monterey County has a lot of individuals with developmentally disabled adults. There are several programs throughout the area and even Hope has three sites within Monterey County



alone, two of which are in Salinas. It is my job as a current resident, and employee at Hope Services to spread understanding.

This is what my poems are meant to do in telling my story with the clients: Create Understanding. Each poem is a timeline which shows that it does take time to break down pre-laid stigmas. The conclusion of each poem describes how I interact or feel about each client now. Honestly, they have become like a second family to me and I want the world to know them as I do. To learn of their genuineness, what they get excited about, and all the little quirks they have that can brighten anyone's day.

This topic has allowed me to take this approach because it is my story, as well as bits and pieces of their own stories. Through my eyes I can get other students, teachers, and all future readers to take a few moments to start their own path to "Coming into Understanding" and learning acceptance.

Many other students are working on their own "story" projects and they are amazing. I love reading my group members pieces though each is very different than mine in their own way and yet they still hold onto storytelling. The broadness of this topic allows each student to focus on something that is very important to them. When you write about something important, then the writing tends to take a life of its own. Passion helps create good stories. Good stories become stuck in reader's minds, never forgotten. If you use stories to make readers think, to call to action, to persuade then you create moments where passion rises.

This is what I hope to accomplish. I want a reader to look back on my poems, remembering the bits that moved them, in hopes it moves them to take time. I want them to be willing to take the time to make a difference in their own lives by "Coming into Understanding"

of the lives of the many developmentally disabled individuals they are sure to come across in their lifetime.

# Final Synthesis Essay

Since I finished my service learning here at CSUMB I have known the voices I wanted to speak out with and for. When entering my capstone, I realized that besides word of mouth there were other ways I could advocate for the developmentally disabled in our community. Being that my concentration is creative writing and social action, I decided to rally together everything I learned my past two years at CSUMB and advocate through a small collection of poetry.

My service learning at Hope Services, a day program for developmentally disabled adults, conditioned me to easily transition into a part time staff at the site. My time with the clients enabled me to create bridges for understanding on my school campus, especially in my classes. In Professor Fletcher's class, there were many opportunities for class discussions that would begin about the class assigned readings. Through many of these readings I was able figure out just how I wanted to structure my poems and the order in which I should place them, to have the utmost effect on the readers. There were even moments during the discussions that would inspire the start of more poems. My first poem was started during one of the discussions.

Since our section is storytelling, it makes sense to use a book called *Minds Made for Stories*. In this book, Newkirk argues that our brains retain information through the act of storytelling. He says there is an argument that "with narrative texts we 'enter into the world of the author' but that with informational texts we do not—primarily because nothing 'happens' in these texts. We stay more outside of them; we use them, but we don't enter them" (11). However, he believes that even informational texts have a story, the writer just needs to know how to use narrative to create understanding.

In class we were tested this theory at the beginning of the semester. We were given a writing prompt that instructed us to create a story about how we acquired name. Going in I didn't know most of my classmates' names. Throughout the first few weeks everyone got the opportunity to share their name stories, and I will not claim to remember all the stories but I did learn names a lot easier. I will very openly state now that I am, and always have been horrible with names (it took me months to learn all my co-worker's names and there are only 12 of them). One story I remember was a man whose original name was not Dominic, but a cute girl that he liked when he was little said that he looked like a Dominic. It stuck, so now he is known by most as Dominic.

I enjoyed the name stories so much that it inspired me to write my poems in a similar fashion. Each poem a story focusing on one, individual client. This touch of personalization is meant to help breed remembrance just like in the name stories. As I created the poems I built them out of my own story of getting to know the clients.

Before going to Hope Services, I did not realize how needlessly uncomfortable I would feel around developmentally disabled adults, little did I know just how much a few months at the program would change me. I realized that humans are afraid of what they don't know, which has often been used to describe conservative individuals towards progressive movements. In this situation, I was the conservative being exposed to a whole new environment. However, I pushed my comfort zone and struggled to build relationships with the wonderful individuals I work with today.

We read a selection written by Katie Cunningham called "Why stories matter". In this excerpt, she starts talking about a concept called mirrors and windows. Mirrors in stories help connect readers to the stories. I used this idea to build my story. When writing these poems, I had

to break down my new conception and remember the negative emotions I felt when I first arrived at Hope. I needed to duplicate the level of discomfort I felt with people with developmental disabilities for the first time. By doing this I could connect to other individuals that also experience this discomfort. I wanted to mirror the negative stereotypes people feel and then use my experiences as a window into the lives of my clients. This is where having members of my class read my poems came in handy.

Though only two of my readers were aspiring poets (and good ones at that) most of my readers were not. That left them with nothing more than raw reader feedback, and I loved it! Having poets read your work is great when it comes to craft, development, and creativity. However, I want my work to have the capability to reach everyone. I needed to make sure that the feelings I wanted to get across were there, obvious, relatable. I am not down playing poets feedback; it was just as important. I needed both to create my project appropriately. In my class, six of us got together and formed a group. We would get together and read, question, and help build each other's pieces. Silently we would pass out our piece and set off to build constructive feedback for the others' pieces.

Getting feedback from Professor Fletcher was also very helpful. She would write questions in the margins which ended up helping me develop my poems more effectively so that they could be clearly understood with no confusion. Her reader feedback was extremely helpful and needed. When writing a creative piece, it is necessary to be willing to receive any and all feedback so that a better, more well-rounded work can be produced. I also got good feedback from Professor Busman when it came to properly addressing the piece. She gave suggestions to change the tense, and to adjust the first person to second to make poems flow better.

Often-times there would be a section of the poetry that made complete sense (being the one who wrote and experienced it) to me but the other group members would point it out as vague. This was extremely helpful for trying to reach a large audience and be as open and easy to understand as possible.

Being able to write about something that I am passionate about made the capstone process, though lengthy, an absolute joy. Being able to take the concept of storytelling and turn it into poems that will, hopefully, bring about social change in our society. My project has been done in a timely manner, all per the class schedule and the timeline I created for myself. I followed the guidelines for a creative project and yet made it completely my own.

This is, without a doubt, a collection I am very proud of. It builds from the capstones theme of story by telling my experiences in, what I hope to be, a very captivating way. Using poetry, I was able to proudly face all aspects of my concentration through both creative writing and social action. My hope is that my pieces are able to reach many ears, and touch hearts so that as a society we can come to a better understanding of the developmentally disabled people that live with us every day.

# Works Cited

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