Making My Own Map

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Maps are all around us. They exist in many shapes and forms, from blueprints and GPS, to grocery lists and meeting agendas. You can map languages, heritage, and battlefields - the list is endless. In my own life, I can look back and map the steps that have brought me to this point, as well as look to the future and try and map out where I am going next.

Coming into college, I had a very clear plan of the how the following four years, and the rest of my life, were supposed to go. It looked something like this: science degree, grad school, good job, stable career, comfortable life. This isn’t a bad map, but I soon realized it wasn’t mine. It was the result of a lot of influences: teachers, parents, friends, and society in general. Eventually I found the courage to throw that map out and start finding my own way. It was time to start making my own map. I had only a vague idea of what the end goal was, and an even fuzzier idea of how to get there. By creating my own map, I have grown in ways and experienced things I never would have imagined.

However, this creation of a new map did not happen overnight. As I went through the process of questioning, rejecting, and then creating maps, I also developed what Robert Kegan, a psychologist and professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, first called self-authorship. This idea of self-authorship was further studied by Elizabeth Creamer, the Director of Assessment for the Virginia Tech ADVANCE program, a National Science Foundation funded project “to promote the success of faculty women in science and engineering.
through institutional transformation” (Elizabeth Creamer). She led a study in which she observed the level of self-authorship in college women in particular.

Self-authorship can be defined as “the ability to collect, interpret, and analyze information and reflect on one's own beliefs in order to form judgments” (Creamer 14). It is not just about writing your own story, but being able to collect information and make your own judgments and decisions, thus allowing you to be the primary force in your own life. The development of self-authorship is generally broken down into three stages: a “reliance on external formulas”, a “progression through a developmental crossroads”, and the development of “epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal maturity” (Creamer 16). Through this development, it is also important to develop a strong sense of self. According to Peggy Meszaros, a professor of Human Development at Virginia Tech, this can be done by “intense self-reflection and interaction with others”, which leads one to “begin to chose their own values and identity” (11). These three stages and development of identity can be seen as I go through my process of making my own map by analyzing the following artifacts from my college career.

**A Snapshot of the Beginning**

My very first college assignment was an introduction letter for my Honors English class. In the letter I talk about my family, my interests, hobbies, major, etc. When I wrote this letter, there was so much I wanted to say. I was brimming with excitement, mixed with a healthy dose of terror, about this new chapter in my life. College promised so many opportunities. It felt like there were hundreds of things to do, and I wanted to do them all.
The letter is a good snapshot of the person I was when starting my college journey four years ago, and my ideas of my past, present, and future self. I talk about my family, my hometown, and my middle and high school experiences. I even mention where my mother and father grew up. My identity was still heavily rooted in my family and being the smart kid. When I started college I was still in the band, with plans to join the marching band when it came around. I joined the honors program and looked forward to studying abroad. I was excited to take challenging classes and had grand visions of myself in a pristine white lab coat and safety glasses, doing complicated and important experiments. This letter represents the first stop on the map of my college journey.

Looking back, it is interesting that I wrote two sentences about my chemistry major, but an entire paragraph about my love of reading. My head was going one way; my heart was clearly going another. Though today the decision to change majors feels obvious, it would take another year and a half for me to even consider it. This letter is also symbol and a reflection of a young woman following the map in her head of what college is supposed to be. Joining the band, finding a campus ministry, studying abroad, doing research, etc. These things now sound like a checklist. None of these are bad things to do, but my motivation was less about me enjoying the organizations and opportunities, and more about following a prescribed map.

This checklist is an example of one of the “external formulas” that I was following. I relied heavily on what others had done before me, and what I thought the college experience was supposed to look like. According to Creamer, in this
beginning stage an individual’s “lack of awareness of their own values and identity, combined with a need for others’ approval, leads to an externally defined identity and that is easily influenced by other factors” (17).

This is most apparent when I examine the checklist items that I carried on from high school, such as playing in the band and joining a campus ministry. In high school, I was very involved in the band and the youth group, but when I reached college, I found I did not enjoy them as I used to. The main difference between the two experiences was the peers I was surrounded with. In high school, my best friends were in band and youth group. It was important to them, making it more important to me than perhaps it would have been without them. When that external affirmation of my friends disappeared in college, I was left with a hollow experience that was a shadow of what it had been before. Things that had made up such a large part of my identity were suddenly less important. When school became harder, they were the first things to go. At the time, the ease with which I discarded these things bothered me, because without them I struggled to define who I was. Because of this, I placed more of my identity into my major.

**Explosive Reaction Yields Unexpected Product**

Growing up, I was always told, “You’re going to be a scientist one day.” When I examine my childhood self, it’s not hard to understand why. My grandfather worked at the military lab in Los Alamos and my father was an engineer. I’d always liked and excelled in science; throughout my early education, I drove my parents crazy picking difficult science fair projects. For example, I one year I wanted to study how far a person can lean before falling over, instead of doing a nice and easy plant
experiment, like my younger sister. I would spend hours pouring over one of my favorite books, *How Things Work*, which described the workings of everything from an escalator to a dust mite.

Creamer states that studies have shown that parental support is influential for girls who go into a technical or science career (15). While my parents always encouraged me to follow my dreams, they were especially supportive of my interest in science. Though they were careful to never explicitly demand I major in chemistry or engineering, I could see the pride in my dad’s eyes when I’d discuss my interest in pursuing it. My father would often take me to his office and explain the science behind the products his company made in the labs. If I was lucky, I would get to go inside.

When it came time to start thinking about a major in my senior year of high school, science was an obvious choice. I wasn’t very interested in biology or physics, but I was taking AP Chemistry, and I had an awesome teacher who exposed me to all the career options chemistry could lead to.

I was proud to be a chemistry major. Though I was not in it for the money, that was going to be a nice perk. Being a female scientist, I was also going to have an advantage in the job market. And I do not like to admit it, but I enjoyed the impressed look on people’s faces when I told them what I was studying. Creamer also states that a “mother and father’s support of a career choice has been shown to be higher for women who choose STEM fields as opposed to more traditional career fields” (15). Chemistry was a major for “smart” people, and it fit other’s expectations of me, as well as my parents’ and my own.
Again this expresses the idea that I was following "external formulas" (Creamer 16). I had a plan that I thought was my own, but was really a combination of others’ opinions and values. I believed I needed a major which would lead to a respected, stable career and a good income, and science fit the bill.

I followed my map for the first three semesters of college. That spring was the first time I had really struggled with a class, which was Organic Chemistry. But I put in a lot of time and effort, and managed to get through it. My world had been shaken a little, but I took pride in overcoming an obstacle.

Then I started the first semester of my sophomore year. I was taking a variety of classes, but the most difficult was Organic Chemistry II. The first month was not so bad. The class was interesting, which was saying something for a three times a week at eight o’clock. I thought I had a grip on things, and spent several days studying for the first exam. I have always prided myself at being a levelheaded test taker, but in that exam, I wanted to cry, throw up, and storm out of the classroom. Instead I meekly turned in my packet after an hour of torture. But if I thought the test was bad, it was nothing compared to when I got it back. I’d braced myself, knowing that it was not going to be good. But I was not expecting the number at the top of my paper. Thirteen. Not thirteen points out of fifty or something like that, but thirteen percent.

For a few days, it was as if someone had snatched my identity out from under me. Never in my life had I failed so spectacularly. Although it was only a test grade, it represented a much bigger failure. All my life I had been one of the smart kids. A lot of classes I had not needed to study for, but when something was hard, I worked
through it. This was the first time I had tried my best at something, and my best was not good enough.

Once the initial shock wore off, I knew it was not the end of the world; I withdrew from the class with plans to retake it, even if I had to get a tutor. However, the more I thought about my future in chemistry, the more I realized how unhappy I was. I was dreading every class I had to take, and if I was honest with myself, I was not excited about my career prospects either. I spent a lot of time that month trying to pin down exactly why I was majoring in chemistry, and I came to see that when it came down to it, I was a science major because I had not thought it feasible to do anything else that interested me. Throughout high school, I had loved history and English, but had never heard anyone say anything positive about a major in those areas. All I heard was you either teach, or work in a coffee shop. Since neither of those options appealed to me, and I never heard any different opinions, science became the obvious choice.

Though majoring in chemistry and choosing that corresponding map was my choice to a degree, society also played a large role. It is a simple enough equation. Science major equals good job. Good job equals money. Money equals happiness. Of course this isn’t always true, and I came to the decision that though this map was safe, stable, and secure, it was not worth the time and effort if it meant sacrificing my happiness, both in college and in my career.

At the time, I thought I was rejecting maps. I thought I was throwing off the burden of having to follow directions. But it is impossible to truly reject maps. Everything you do, every choice and action, moves you forward in life to something
else. Instead of rejecting maps, I was rejecting the idea of being told exactly how to get from point A to point B. I was going to figure it out myself. Letting go of my science major, and all the ideas about the future that it was scary, but when it was done, a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. I found myself being excited about my future classes for the first time.

My decision to leave chemistry was a result of external factors and a weak sense of self. One big failure, one big wind, and I blew right over. My identity was rooted in being a chemistry major, not in the passion for the subject. It was rooted in getting good grades, not in truly understanding the material. I did not have the dedication or the desire needed to withstand the challenges that were being thrown at me.

However, this moment was also the beginning of reaching the crossroads, or stage two of the development of self-authorship. Creamer defines individuals in the crossroad stage as having an “evolving awareness of their own values and are beginning the self-exploration needed to create an identity that is distinct from others’ perceptions” (17).

A big part of this awareness came by “learning to evaluate knowledge claims and choose beliefs”, instead of “simple acceptance of information provided by authorities”, in regards to being an English major (Creamer 17). I had always been told that an English major will lead to nothing but being a teacher or a barista, and I had never questioned that belief. For years, I would tell people, “If I could do anything in the world and be successful at it, I would write books.” But I never actually believed that it was a viable goal. I just accepted that a major in English
could be fun, but was a terrible life choice with no prospects. I never even looked for another opinion or evidence.

But as I started to evaluate myself and realize that English and writing were what I loved and truly wanted to do, I began to look deeper into what an English major really offers. I discovered the multitude of job opportunities that are available to English majors. I learned about the skills that you gain, and how they were applicable to many other things. I realized there was a whole other side to the story that I had never been exposed to.

The second stage of development started with my test failure, but stretched through the majority of my college career. For a person who likes to plan, suddenly not having one is terrifying. Not only had I given up my science career, I had not even picked something sensible like business or communications. While I knew that I was happier than I had been in years, part of me was worried that I had made the wrong decision. There is a good chance I would have caved and switched to a safer career choice for a major, had it not been for my semester abroad the following spring.

London Calling

Studying abroad is the one thing from the original map that did not end up getting thrown out, and it played a large role in my development towards self-authorship. Without going to London, I might have turned about from the crossroads, and relapsed back into the beginning stage of external formulas.

Studying abroad had always been a dream of mine. That January, I packed up my suitcase, which thankfully weighed in at fifty pounds even, and boarded a plane
for London, England. It is hard to describe the feeling when that plane takes off for a
brand new country, knowing that you will not be back for five months. I vacillated
between wanting to cry from excitement and wanting to throw up from terror.

London may not seem very exotic; but to me, a Southern girl from a relatively
suburban town, it was an entirely different world. The first few weeks were like
being set adrift in a large sea. We had advisors, but we had to figure out a lot of
things on our own. The second day there I had to find my way to the university by
myself. A journey that eventually took only half an hour took me two. I wandered
the whole town before I finally found it.

Not only was I physically lost, but culturally, there were so many differences.
The way I talked, walked, and dressed was foreign. I had a new set of social and
cultural rules to learn. Did you know that if you do not press a stop button, the bus
will go right past your stop? I didn’t. I don’t think I’ve ever been prouder than the
day I realized I could successfully navigate the bus, train, and underground
system. Want to wear tennis shoes because you will be walking all day? That will
get your wallet stolen in a heartbeat because you look like a tourist. Stand on the left
side of the escalator, and your hair will catch fire from the death glares of fifty angry
British people who are too polite to ask you to step to the side so that they can
continue climbing. It was overwhelming at first, but after a while it became easier. I
soon realized that I wasn’t just surviving. I was thriving.

Being able to succeed in a foreign country on my own was a huge confidence
builder for me. It suddenly made succeeding as an English major and building my
dream life back in the States seem less scary and more attainable. Abroad, I learned
to rely on and to be an advocate for myself, and those skills transferred back with me.

London is an amazingly diverse city, filled with people and cultures from all over the world. Many of the other study-abroad students were from other countries like Australia, Turkey, France, and Mexico, to name a few. Getting to know these people from vastly different backgrounds and beliefs helped me see that there is more than one way to live your life and achieve your goals. There is no one right way to go about it. For example, my friend Nick from Australia was going to graduate in three years with a law degree, something that can take eight years or longer in America.

While in London I was exposed to so many different beliefs, viewpoints, and backgrounds, that it became necessary for me to hold on to and develop that sense of true self that I had discovered last semester. It also allowed me to learn to view different ideas and opinions and understand them, without losing myself to that same belief, which is a large part of stage three of self-authorship (Creamer 17).

**A Tale of Two Schools**

While studying at Kingston, I had the opportunity to take a British culture class, where we learned about everything from government, to theatre, to television. For my final, I wrote a paper discussing the differences in the British and American higher education systems. Compared to America, the British system is much stricter and more structured.

In high school, British students choose three or four subjects to focus on for their last couple years. They then take tests, called A-Levels, for three of these
subjects. Depending on how well they do on the tests, they can then choose to major in one of those subjects. Once students start university, most do not take a wide variety of classes, but only ones related to their major. There is no true equivalent to our general education courses in the States, which are meant to “help students develop...integrative thinking, communication, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking” and work to “build a foundation of knowledge” (Nelson Laird). Without these general education courses, it is normal for British students to graduate in three years.

If a students wish to major in something else, they must completely start over. If they wish to major in something that they did not take the test for, they must first pass the A-Level, along with starting over. After experiencing the British university system myself, it made me realize how much freedom we have in our own university system. We have the liberty of trying out different paths, different maps, unlike the British students, whose paths are mostly decided for them and very difficult to change.

If I had gone to university in England, I would have been halfway done when I decided to change my major, setting me behind a year and a half. Thanks to picking a flexible major, I am able to graduate on time. I now appreciate having that flexibility to be able to try something else, and not be locked into a decision I made when I was eighteen.

Stage three is defined by Creamer as an “internally generated sense of self that that guides interpretation of experience and choices, accompanied by the ability to evaluate and interpret knowledge claims in light of the available evidence, and
the capacity to genuinely consider other’s perspectives without being overshadowed by them” (17). Throughout this entire paper I was researching another idea of what a secondary education should look like that was vastly different from mine, along with my own experiences of both systems. I was able to look at the positives and negatives of both, without being so tied to my own system that I was completely closed-minded to the new one, and without being so enamored with the new one that I completely disregarded the old one.

**Mind the Gap**

A map of the London Underground, commonly referred to as the Tube, represents an important part of my time in London. This map holds a lot of meaning for me, for several different reasons. The first is that it represents a huge personal achievement for me. I am terrible with directions. I have lived in one city all my life, and can still only get a handful of places. Without my GPS, I would be lost ninety percent of the time. Somehow though, the Tube clicked for me. I became a master. I did not have the entire map memorized, but I was good at navigating it. It was a strange feeling to have people ask *me* how to get somewhere.

Because of this, the Tube became a symbol of freedom and exploration. It could take me almost anywhere in central London. One minute I was in Trafalgar Square, and fifteen minutes later I was in Camden markets. I could explore to my heart’s content without fear of getting dangerously lost, because I knew as long as I could find a Tube entrance, I could get home. I grew to love the polite British lady’s voice reminding you to “mind the gap” as the doors slid open. The London Underground, and London in general, is the first place I have felt truly free to
explore whatever I wanted. So what if I had no reason to go to Notting Hill? I could go anyway. I found some of my favorite places just by getting off before my stop to see what was there.

After being so excited about revolting against my original map, it is a little ironic that I quickly became attached to another, although physical, map. In a way, the Tube helped me understand more about my ideas of maps, and realize that they are not necessarily bad. Though the Tube is confined and limited by nature, it opened so many doors and allowed me a huge amount of freedom. This reinforces the idea that following a map for your life is not wrong in and of itself. Maps give us the safety and security to explore, knowing we can still get to where we are going.

**Paris Est Toujours Une Bonne Idée**

While abroad, I also took a trip with my mother to Paris, France. Even though I had not officially declared it yet, while in London I had decided I was going to change my minor in French to a major. This was a huge deviation from my original map, even more than becoming an English major. The smarter choice for an additional major or minor would have been business, communications, or journalism. But the French language and culture was something I was passionate about, and wanted to pursue, despite people’s skepticism.

My experiences in Paris also represent the huge growth I underwent when it comes to being independent. My mother came on the trip with me, but I planned the entire trip by myself. Once there, I was the one who handled the hotel, the money, buying tickets for things, navigation, etc. I knew a little French at this point, but not much. Still, I managed to get by.
Not only was this trip good practice for my French, but it gave me a glimpse at what living in a country where the natives do not speak English might be like. I was surprised by how much communication could be made with so few words. The clearest memory of this was on our first morning in Paris when we were unable to learn where to buy tickets for the metro. I surveyed our surroundings, and decided a police officer was my best bet for an English speaker. He responded to my “Bonjour, Monsieur. Parlez-vous anglais?” with a quick “non”. A little shocked, I paused for a moment, desperately trying to find the words I needed. “Billets pour métro (tickets for metro)?” I finally managed. His face softened a bit and he started rattling off something in French. I must have looked a little panicked because he stopped and pointed. “Acheter (to buy)?” I asked, pointing in the same direction. He smiled and nodded. I thanked him and we proceeded to get our tickets, and had a wonderful day exploring the city. I remember walking away from the man with a small spring in my step, a tiny surge of pride in my chest. I had hit an obstacle, and I had overcome it.

It was also a reminder that even though we come from totally different places and speak different languages, we are still the same at the basic levels. I had heard so many stereotypes about the French hating Americans, but I found this to be generally false. I found that if I showed respect, I tended to receive it. My mother, like many people, tends to snap at people and get exasperated when she is anxious and uncomfortable, but as I found over and over on my travels, a little bit of kindness and understanding can go a long way. Just by trying my best to use his
words, I was able to show the policeman that I respected his culture and city, and in
return he helped me as best he could.

My trip to Paris reaffirmed my decision to study French, both as a language
and a culture. At the Opera Populaire, I found a small book titled *Sherlock Holmes et
le Fantome de l’Opera*, by Nicholas Meyer. It included two of my favorite literary
figures, but it was way above my French reading level. I bought it anyway. Beyond
the sentimentality, it was a goal. I promised myself that if I bought the book, I would
read it someday, which meant I would have to learn enough French to do so. There
have been times when learning French has been discouraging and seemed more
trouble than it’s worth, but a glance at that simple little book on my shelf will give
me the boost I need.

British culture is very different from American culture, but the gap between
American and French culture is even greater. Learning about French culture and the
language has greatly expanded my perspective of the world and my awareness of
my own biases and prejudices. Even something as trivial as the differences between
American and French hotels helped grow my awareness and perspective. We stayed
in a relatively expensive hotel, and I was surprised as how things that I took for
granted in other hotels were missing. We had a key to get into our room, not a swipe
card. The wrought-iron bed held a thin mattress with a quilt and two pillows. There
was one electrical outlet. My mother wanted to leave immediately. In her mind, a
hotel was supposed to look a certain way, and this one was not cutting it. However,
after a few nights, we learned to enjoy the quaint quirks, and realized that we could
survive without our usual American comforts. The next time I stayed in an American
hotel, I was very aware of the mountains of pillows on the beds and the five lamps in the room. There is nothing wrong with appreciating such comforts, but I am now aware and accepting of different ideas of what is required in a hotel in different places.

In classes I have learned about French government, history, and general beliefs. The French consider free health care to be a human right, which is a far cry from how it is viewed in America. On the other hand, they have a much stricter policy on keeping religion out of schools, not allowing Muslim girls to wear hijabs. Learning to not judge these issues based solely off my own experiences and others opinions, but to look at both sides of the issues in a cultural context as well, has help me in my development of self-authorship. I understand why and how things have come to be a certain way, and that ability to understand a point of view and empathize can be translated across many different fields and experiences.

I find myself looking at events and problems, both locally and globally, and thinking, how would a British person approach or see this? A French person? What about someone from Brazil, or China? Being able to look at things from another perspective besides my own has made a large impact on how I relate to people and choices in my life.

**Postcards from Russia**

While studying in London and traveling to Paris had expanded my worldview and cemented my decision to create and follow my own map, I was not expecting to have a similar experience back in the States.
After the initial excitement of coming home wore off, I experienced immense reverse culture shock. I was dying for any taste of another culture. At the International Festival in the fall, I learned about the International House, which is a place where immigrants and non-English speakers can have a place to come and receive help and resources for adjusting to life in the United States. One of the things they do is offer an hour and a half of English tutoring every week for ten-week periods. Excited at meeting someone who was from another country and who spoke another language, I volunteered. The students took a placement test, which would place them anywhere from basic to advanced.

As a tutor, I had an orientation session, and then was given a packet of lesson plans. The first class I was really nervous. More than anything, I felt a little out of place. The majority of the students were over thirty, some even old enough to be my grandparent. It felt strange to be in a position of knowledge and authority over people so much older than me. Still, I had spent a while preparing my first lesson, and walked in that day feeling decently prepared.

However, nothing could have prepared me for Marina, who had recently moved here from Russia, and who already spoke decent conversational English. I learned that she had been a psychologist in Russia, but had moved here to be with her husband. We went through the lesson I had prepared, both a little awkward. Or perhaps I was the awkward one, as I was not sure how much to correct or where to steer her. But Marina agreed to everything I said with a smile. I had never met anyone from Russia before, and I found myself surprised at how open and friendly she was. I was embarrassed when I realized I had unintentionally stereotyped
Marina, especially having just spent months meeting people from all over the world. It was a good reminder that I was still learning and evolving, and still am today.

The second class she walked in and asked if I had ever read *Anna Karenina*. She had just finished it in Russian. We talked for several minutes about books, both suggesting titles we had found interesting. We moved on to the lesson, and did an exercise where we wrote a story together. I would write one sentence, then she would write another. We ended up with a story about a silly dog who stole socks and wore them on his hands. Because our earlier conversation took up so much time, I had to throw out part of the lesson I had prepared.

The next week Marina handed me a beautiful pastel illustration of our story, which, more than anything, spoke to the type of person she was. She was incredibly smart, yet she also had a child’s curiosity and fearlessness about everything. She loved art and music and books, and was constantly trying out new classes, whether in art or in dance. She had lived in this city for less than a year and hardly spoke the language, yet she had experienced much more in a few months than I probably have in four years.

I eventually threw the lesson plans out the window completely, which was hard for me to do. I was afraid I would look dumb or lazy. Instead of doing boring grammar exercises, we talked. We discussed St. Petersburg, books, the ethics of clothing brands, philosophy. Whatever we thought was interesting that day. Given my role as a planner and the teacher, I liked to have an idea of what exercises we were going to do, what words or verb tenses we were going to practice. But once again, I had to experience another moment of letting go of my map.
This time it was easier, probably because the consequences were less severe. But looking back, I can see how during the few months of being back in the country, I had subconsciously started to fall back into my old way of thinking. Again, without the stimulating differentness that is London and the constant flow of new experiences, I was in danger of becoming stagnant and falling back into the mindset of accepting what is given to me without question. Though I enjoyed the subjects better, I could have easily fallen back into the checklist and maps trap that I thought I had managed to escape. Without Marina’s energetic and spontaneous influence once a week, I might have ended up almost as miserable in my new majors as I was before.

At our last lesson Marina gave me some postcards from Russia. I have collected postcards since I was eight, though she did not know that. I lost touch with her after our lessons ended, but I will always keep those postcards. Although I was technically her teacher, she taught me more than I ever taught her. Though I only knew her for ten weeks, the memory of her will follow me through my life. She was a wake-up call and an inspiration to continue to push myself and continue creating my own map. Whenever I find myself settling into a slump, I remember her crazy adventures and love for life, and it encourages me to think outside the box and push myself out of my comfort zone.

Marina is a wonderful example of someone who has a fully developed sense of self-authorship. She knows who she is and what she wants, but she is not blind to or dismissive of other people’s views and ideas. She is open to trying new things and looking at things a different way, but at the end of the day she is still herself. Marina
remained an amazingly positive and enthusiastic person because she was able to hold on to that sense of self through a difficult time of transition.

Chapter One

Sometimes it is easy to feel like not much happened to me after studying abroad and my time with Marina. But of course things happened. Namely, I jumped headfirst into my writing. Both my time abroad and my experience with Marina had helped me see that it was possible to pursue my dream of writing. The last year or so I have been putting in the hard work to see that dream inch towards reality.

I have taken several creative writing classes, and seen my skills vastly improve with each one. My favorite, and the one I am the most proud of, was Writing YA (Young Adult) Fantasy. In that class I produced what has been the most difficult piece of writing I have attempted so far: a novel synopsis.

A novel synopsis, at least the type for this class, is a unique piece of writing. It must convey the plot points of the novel, from beginning to end, as well as the major character arcs. On top of that, the writing and style must be the same as the work and should engage the reader enough to want to read your book. All within three pages.

The first page was easy enough. We were simultaneously writing the first novel chapter, so I already knew what my beginning looked like. Then came the hard part. What happens next? This assignment showed me the nitty-gritty part of what being an author entails. Lots of people can think of great ideas for a book and can even claim to have plotted it out in their heads. But to actually put it down on paper,
where it all makes sense, fits together, and is engaging? That is where it gets difficult.

Of course, a novel synopsis is open to change as you write your novel, but that did not make writing an original one any easier. I went through draft after draft. A few times I changed something in the beginning that completely negated everything else I had come up with so far. When I finally finished, I did not have a perfect novel. But I had a complete one. I could write that novel, if I wanted to.

A novel synopsis is in many ways a type of map. I knew where the story started, as well as all of the stops along the way, and, of course, where it ended. I just needed to fill in the details. If I wanted to see it in a physical map form, I could draw the synopsis on a line in chronological order.

That semester, I truly embraced writing as a career choice. It became more than just a dream for the future, but a decision that would direct the path my life takes. Though I will always grow, this is where I reached the final stage in regards to self-authorship in college and my career.

When I first switched to an English major, I had on rose-colored glasses, envisioning endless opportunity and fun. Today, while I know that the stereotypes of English majors that I had been fed for years are false, I also know that this rosy view of it is wrong as well. However, through English I developed a much stronger sense of self and identity, not relying on outside forces to define it for me.

In choosing a career path, I looked carefully at different options. I looked at many different paths I could take, and the positives and negatives of each. I sought advice from many different people: professors, advisors, friends, parents, authors,
and even people on the Internet. I looked at the issue from all sides, trying to understand the consequences of each choice.

In the end of the day, I processed all the advice and information I had learned, and made my own decision to pursue writing as a career. The path will not be easy, but I will not be blown over or knocked down so quickly like I was with chemistry. I will overcome obstacles, because I now find my sense of identity within myself, not in the external labels I have created. For example, writing is part of my identity, but my success as a writer is not. A love for learning is part of my identity. My grades and success as a student are not. Knowing these things makes obstacles like a bad grade or a rejection, if not easier, more realistic to deal with, because those external forces can no longer change my internal self, desires, goals, and actions.

Many people think I am making a mistake pursuing writing, that I am dooming myself to poverty and disappointment and wasting my smarts. Because of self-authorship, I have the ability to look at those arguments and understand their point of view, and know that they could very well be right. But I am making my own choice after weighing all the options. I am making my own map.

**Conclusion**

The map of my college career is not pretty. It is not simple. No one else could ever follow it. It is a mess of detours and roadblocks. But it is also a map of successes and discoveries. More importantly, it is mine. I am seeing the vague idea of the endpoint that I started with materialize around me. If you had told my freshman,
chemistry major self that I was going to go to graduate school for creative writing, I would have laughed. And yet, I start a program at UNCG in the fall.

I learned to let go and explore once and awhile. Pop down that side street or get off at the next tube stop. Something may surprise me. At the very least, I will have learned something new about myself or the world. I know longer feel the need to make it to the laid out step. If things do not go exactly as planned, that is okay. It might be a sign that I need to re-evaluate my map, and make sure I am still the one in control.

I can see the ways I have grown, and the places where I could grow and develop more. I am looking into the future at the next direction the map will take. There will probably com a time when I have to make a new map again. And I am okay with that. I started my college career by rejecting a map. But I learned that following a map is not a bad thing. I am going to follow one whether I realize it or not. It is choosing my own that made the difference. While making the choice does not guarantee the destination, it gives me the energy and drive to give it my best shot.

