

Professional Reflection Essay

Identity Flow Creative

Parker Atwood

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Project Overview and Personal Journey

Anne Tucker (n.d.) once said, "All art requires courage." I used to believe that meant the courage to start or the courage to pick up a camera or attempt to sketch an idea. Looking back at the last few years, I realize it actually means the courage to finish. My path to this degree was not a straight line; it was a rigorous journey through industrial labor and deep personal loss alongside a major academic shift from computer programming to graphic design. As Tom May (2025) writes for Creative Bloq, a portfolio is "more than just a collection of work, it's the cornerstone of your creative identity." For me, Identity Flow Creative is exactly that. It is the defining mark of my transition from years of labor jobs into the professional design world. This capstone project represents the synthesis of those experiences and serves as the bridge between my student career and my professional future.

Reframing My Perception

I did not choose to be a visual thinker; I had to become one. Diagnosed with dyslexia at a young age, I found traditional learning to be a chaotic and exhausting experience. Words would drift on the page, and reading felt like a battle. I remember using a blue film overlay on papers and books to calm the text down so I could see the information clearly. That struggle was actually my first lesson in design strategy regarding cognitive factors. It trained my brain to rely on hierarchy and contrast, along with layout, to make sense of the world. While I did not know it at the time, I was learning the fundamentals of accessibility principles that the GSA (2025) emphasizes are critical for ensuring information is available to everyone regardless of ability. By analyzing my own cognitive hurdles, I developed a design philosophy that prioritizes clarity and structure.

My reliance on the visual became a strength when I picked up my first digital camera at the age of 15. Photography allowed me to communicate without the barrier of spelling. In high school, I was lucky to have two mentors who shaped my trajectory. Mr. Mellon was my photography teacher; he taught me that a powerful image is not just a lucky snapshot. It is a deliberate calculation of light and timing. He instructed me to look through the viewfinder and see the world in terms of exposure, contrast, and balance. I spent countless hours in the darkroom learning the basics of photography, and later transitioned to digital photography, where we learned Photoshop and editing skills. Under his guidance, I learned that the work does not stop when you click the shutter because it continues in the processing and presentation. Simultaneously, Mr. Welch introduced me to the digital side of creativity. He showed me that while photography captures a moment, design gives it a structure.

Application of Tools and Technology

In my high school classes, I gained a level of proficiency in the Adobe Creative Suite, photography, and design that has surpassed any coursework or training I have completed since. This education led me to build my first website to showcase my work. Even in 2016, it was clunky, had a basic structure, and had a hard time functioning, but with the help of another mentor, Bob, it was a live functioning site. It planted a seed that would grow years later. This was the desire to control, not just the image, but the platform it lives on.

When I first enrolled in college, I ignored my artistic background and pursued a Bachelor of Science in Computer Programming, thinking that pure logic was the safer career path. My turning point came during a Python coding class where I spent weeks debugging a project. I got the code to work, but looking at the final product, I felt nothing. I realized I did not want to be a

backend developer staring at lines of text because I missed the visual impact that comes from design. That was my "ouch" moment, but it also turned into my clarity. I switched my degree to a Bachelor of Arts in Graphic Design with a concentration in Web Design. I did not abandon code because I repurposed it by taking every coding class that I could within the scope of my new degree. Andrew Thompson (2025) at Pangea argues that "showcasing versatility is key" to a successful portfolio and that clients appreciate designers who can thrive in different environments. By switching to a hybrid role and becoming a designer who can conceptualize a brand like The Nod, while also understanding Swift, HTML, CSS, PHP, and JavaScript needed to make it real. I have positioned myself to meet market demand for versatility using a wide range of industry tools.

The Discipline of Hard Work

Life did not allow me to go straight into a creative career. For years, I worked in physically demanding trades ranging from pest control to laying tile. Currently, I work at a major industrial plant specializing in plumbing, pipe fitting, fabrication, and HVAC. My schedule is grueling and often runs eight to ten hours a day for six or seven days a week. I balance this alongside my higher education and raising three children with my amazing wife.

There were moments I wanted to quit school, but my jobs and experiences taught me a level of resilience that you cannot learn in a classroom. They taught me the job is not done until it is done right, no matter how tired you are. I brought this same unyielding standard to my education. This aligns with Ivan Chermayeff's philosophy, "the only criteria for choosing a design is excellence" (Lupton, 2011). In my view, excellence is not just about talent; it is about the discipline to show up and refine the work until it meets a professional standard. I bring a

relentless work ethic to the screen, where I engineer my designs with a strong commitment to quality and functionality.

Collaboration and Problem Solving

My final portfolio titled "Identity Flow Creative" is the result of my journey. I felt anxious, as graduation approached, about leaving the security of my trade job for the unknown in a creative career. I used this portfolio to prove to myself I was ready. I focused on quality over quantity by combining a specific mix of academic, conceptual, and real-world work to display my range. I selected school projects like Acadia Park and Future Funds alongside conceptual brands such as Salty Sailor Brews and Fab Worx. I also included real-world client work with The Nod, Joe, Iluma, and Ironclad. Together, these demonstrate my ability to build consistent identities across diverse industries.

Evaluating complex problems required input from others. The feedback process in this course was important for my development. I learned that while my concepts were strong, I sometimes rushed the details, which led to simple typography errors. AIGA, n.d. Notes, for a creative director, the ability to take criticism is "an important factor in evaluating your potential to learn." Fixing those errors taught me that craftsmanship is what separates a student from a professional. Collaborating with peers and instructors helped me refine my visual message and address the communication problems embedded in my initial drafts.

Future Professional Goals

The motivation to push through this degree was not just professional; it was personal. Seven years ago, my older brother passed away. He was a graphic designer, photographer, and the biggest mentor in my early years of design and photography. Going back to school and getting my degree was in some way to honor his legacy.

Now that I am at the finish line, my immediate professional priority is to secure a position in brand identity, specifically within the sector of online-based services. Gaining experience in this fast-paced environment will provide the professional stability I need while I refine my process. Once that foundation is set, my goal is to reclaim my time and fully launch Identity Flow Creative as a full-stack creative partner. As Ross Kimbarovsky (2025) explains, a strong brand identity is what distinguishes you from the competition and fosters customer trust. My objective is to design comprehensive brands that establish credibility for a diverse client base.

Long term, I view Identity Flow as a legacy project where operational strategy meets creative execution. My wife's expertise in client relationships and my design skillset will allow us to build an agency that is not just a freelance operation, but a sustainable firm. According to Move At Pace (2025), defining a clear business structure is critical for longevity in the design industry. By combining our strengths, we intend to build a firm stable enough to serve a higher purpose, which is mentorship. My ultimate definition of success is to grow the agency to a point where I can hire and train young designers to pay forward the guidance I received from my mentors.

Conclusion

I am walking away from this degree with more than just a piece of paper. I am leaving with the work ethic of a blue-collar worker, the eye of a photographer, the design capabilities of a visual engineer, and the technical skills of a web designer. Identity Flow Creative is the combination of those worlds. It is a brand built on the belief that if you have the courage to reinvent yourself, you can build anything.

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