

Ventura College Sabbatical Leave Proposal

Curriculum Development and Enhancement Project for Fall 2017

Submitted by Henny Kim-Ortel

English Department

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Instructor's Sabbatical Leave Status

Full-time hire date: August 2000

Part-time district hire date: August 1999

Previous Sabbaticals: 1 (Fall 2008)

Background of Sabbatical Project

Almost everyone I know, including the 120 students I engage with each semester, seems to be going out of their minds. In other words, we, the people who spend our days, more or less together, at and around Ventura College, seem really stressed out. Maybe it's because of this incredibly dismaying presidential campaign season, which has damaged friendships and keeps pointing to the troubling relationship that many fine folks have with social media. Maybe it's because, as a recent issue of the *New York Post* claims, electronic devices are "like 'digital heroine'" that "turn kids into psychotic junkies." In any case, this peculiarly 21st century ailment doesn't appear to be going away, and it's painful to see these harmful effects of stress on my students, friends, colleagues, and myself.

Stress, of course, comes with being human; but there's something about the rapid pace of life in the age of mobile technology and this pervasive compulsion to consume information that makes me anxious. Or as writer Nicholas Carr, in his 2008 *Atlantic* article, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" notes after bemoaning the loss of his own deep-reading skills, "The Internet, an immeasurably powerful computing system, is subsuming most of our other intellectual technologies" and the constant inundation of electronic messages "scatter our attention and diffuse our concentration." Such troubling mental states seem increasingly normalized, and it's evident in my own classes, even as we're discussing texts such as the late David Foster Wallace's "This Is Water," in which the author entreats graduating college students to consciously move out of the prevalent mindless, automatic default mode and realize "the freedom of a real education, of learning how to be well-adjusted."

Numerous studies have shown that stress negatively impacts our physical, mental, and emotional health, and that stress can rewire the brain, leaving us even more vulnerable to a worsening of the painful conditions that we may be trying to relieve. MIT professor and cultural theorist, Sherry Turkle calls attention to the negative impact of electronic devices on our sense of self and in the ways we interact (or, more realistically, avoid interacting) with one another by keeping up an "illusion of privacy" that may become a "dangerous habit of

mind.” That habit of mind relates to extensive research conducted by Harvard psychology professor Ellen J. Langer, who explains “how the mindless—as opposed to the mindful—develop mindsets of categories, associations, habits of thought born of repetition in childhood and throughout schooling.” In *Mindset*, the title of Carol Dweck’s widely referenced 2007 work, the noted Stanford psychologist asserts, “Mindset change is not about picking up a few pointers here and there. It’s about seeing things in a new way. When people...change to a growth mindset, they change from a judge-and-be-judged framework to a learn-and-help-learn framework. Their commitment is to growth, and growth takes plenty of time, effort, and mutual support.” In sum, our minds and how best to manage our own in the midst of daily life and its concomitant vicissitudes matters now more than ever.

In fact, it mattered enough to the three major professional organizations for teaching writing at the college level (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, National Writing Project) that they developed and published the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, which emphasizes Habits of Mind.

Habits of mind refers to ways of approaching learning that are both **intellectual** and **practical** and that will support students’ success in a variety of fields and disciplines:

- ~ **Curiosity** – the desire to know more about the world
- ~ **Openness** – the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world
- ~ **Engagement** – a sense of investment and involvement in learning
- ~ **Creativity** – the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas
- ~ **Persistence** – the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects
- ~ **Responsibility** – the ability to take ownership of one’s actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others
- ~ **Flexibility** – the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands
- ~ **Metacognition** – the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge

Given that these three major organizations also emphasize the need for digital literacies, instructional goals for a college composition course may appear to conflict, but because there may be no reasonable way—or reason for--rejecting computer-assisted writing and research, my intention for this sabbatical project is to integrate mindfulness-based writing and research activities with regular use of computer technology.

Ultimately, my goal is to use the sabbatical leave to study mindfulness strategies and develop activities for the college classroom (both face-to-face and distance education) in order to provide a fuller, more authentic experience of

writing and critical thinking for Ventura College students. Furthermore, I intend to make my annotated bibliography and collection of activities available to colleagues to use freely in their own classes or in professional development workshops.

Purpose of Sabbatical Project

The purpose of this proposed semester-long sabbatical project is threefold: (1) construct an annotated bibliography of articles, books, online sources, and programs on mindfulness that may be useful in college courses where writing is a large component, (2) create mindfulness-based activities to use in face-to-face college courses that require writing and to use in professional development workshops, and (3) develop short educational videos on mindfulness strategies and writing to use in distance education classes.

Components of Sabbatical Project

~ Research

The first phase of my sabbatical leave project includes researching articles, books, online sources, and programs on mindfulness that may be useful in college courses. Already on the list of works I plan to study are *Mindset* (Carol S. Dweck), *Mindfulness* (Ellen J. Langer), *Alone Together* (Sherry Turkle), *Full-Catastrophe Living* (Jon Kabat-Zinn), *The Open Hand: Arguing as an Art of Peace* (Barry M. Kroll), *Habits of the Creative Mind* (Richard E. Miller and Ann Jurecic), *A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers, and the Digital Revolution* (Dennis Baron), *Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies* (Christy Wenger), *Teach, Breathe, Learn* (Meena Srinivasan), *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness* (Deborah Schoeberlein David), and *The Psychology of Writing* (Ronald T. Kellogg).

~ Field Work

To get a full sense of how mindfulness research applies to what people are actually doing as they interact with one another or during self-reflection, I will enroll in workshops offered at UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center, which is a partner of their Center for Psychoneuroimmunology and Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior. The center "fosters and publicizes research to support the scientific benefits of mindful awareness." Six-hour workshops are open to the general public, cost from \$60 to \$75 (which I will pay for myself,) and include topics such as "Mindful Improvisation: A Powerful Synthesis of Mindfulness and Improv." I may also enroll in a Mindful Writing program at the University of Virginia School of Medicine if I am granted a sabbatical.

~ Writing

As an active member of the South Coast Writing Project, the UCSB chapter of the National Writing Project, I have followed the important practice of writing with my students. This practice allows the instructor not only to model the

process of moving from ideas to a written form with attention paid to prominent rhetorical modes and specific learning objectives but also to emphasize authentic learning among members of a shared community. Hence, in the course of creating an extensive annotated bibliography, I will document my own writing process for self-reflection, metacognition, exploration, and publication and create related lessons for my students.

~ Making Wee Movies

Each semester I teach two entirely online sections of English V01B: Critical Thinking and Composition with Literature. I teach using Canvas, which is an effective platform that allows students to engage with a mix of media to supplement their work in reading a required textbook and full-length novel, as well as write to weekly discussion boards and complete five formal essays. Though Canvas is user-friendly, it would be very helpful for students, who do not otherwise have face-to-face interaction with the instructor or classmates, to be able to engage with video clips of their instructor presenting lessons on mindfulness and writing. So I plan to write and create these personalized course-specific videos if I am granted a sabbatical.

Value of Sabbatical Project to VCCCD and Ventura College

The goals I have identified for my project place high value on also being of benefit to the Ventura County Community College District and Ventura College. Helping students to improve their mindset and providing them with mindfulness strategies will help improve student writing, and improved student writing will ensure student success. In a more practical sense, this could mean an increase in student success for over 4,000 students each year, which would be key to the District realizing their goal of increasing student success. In addition, I plan to write an article about my sabbatical project for publication in a scholarly journals, such as *College English*, which will provide recognition to the college.

Value of Sabbatical Project to Ventura College Students

In recent years, there has been a push for more online and hybrid classes at Ventura College, and English classes in particular spend at least half of their in-class time writing on computers. Certainly the need to provide students with better strategies for using computers to write, research, and fulfill the objectives set forth in the course outline remains. Equally needed, however, are tools to manage our own brain's habitual reactions to the stressful detritus of technology and effective strategies for responding more appropriately, including choosing at times to consciously disconnect from technology and instead pay attention to ourselves.

Another benefit to students feels more personal. Over the past sixteen years of teaching at Ventura College, I have felt my role as a teacher most meaningfully when I've had a chance to get to know individual students. With this in mind, I frequently urge students to visit me in my office, and some actually do, while

the others at least receive the message that they are welcome to come talk to me, which establishes a classroom climate in which students feel safe. I am delighted when students actually come to my office hours and feel free enough to allow me get to know them. However, I have also been saddened to realize just how many of my students are dealing with a range of mental health issues, most frequently depression, anxiety, OCD, ADHD, and too many “soft addictions” to list here. Giving students some tools to use—even a three-second breathing and focusing exercise they could do anywhere—would clearly benefit students.

Value of Sabbatical Project to the Instructor

Last year, I had a health scare that required surgery and a short hospital stay. Up to the day before my surgery, I didn't tell my students about what was going on in my life. However, students noticed that I seemed to be stressed out, and when I finally shared that I was dealing with a medical procedure, the rush of sympathy and warm sentiments from my students touched me and confirmed what I love most about my job: being with students. I have since realized how stress has greatly hindered my ability to be with or be present for my students, and it's something I've been trying to remedy by practicing mindfulness whenever I have a spare moment and simply speaking more openly about these common yet widely unacknowledged aspects of living in the 21st century. As a result, I have already begun to see benefits of mindfulness and would love to extend these benefits to my students and our college community.

I thank the committee for your time and consideration.

Respectfully yours,

Henny Kim-Ortel
Professor of English