

## **Sabbatical Leave Report**

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Fall 2017 Sabbatical Leave

PROJECT: Mindful Awareness Practices Integrated with Writing

**This report summarizes the sabbatical project I completed in Fall 2017. I would like to thank the Board of Trustees for approving my sabbatical and giving me the opportunity to deepen my learning and teaching of mindful awareness practices and writing.**

### **Background of Sabbatical Project**

Stress is nothing new; it comes with being human. However, there is something about the rapid pace of life in the age of mobile technology and this pervasive compulsion to consume information that seems to be spreading anxiety at an overwhelming rate. 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 this is 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 was 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.

### **Completed Components of Sabbatical Project**

#### **~ Research**

The first phase of my sabbatical leave project included researching articles, books, online sources, and programs on mindfulness that seemed directly or indirectly useful in college courses. The list of works I planned to study expanded considerably as I immersed in an intensive practice program at UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center and engaged in two to four mindfulness classes per six-week cycle for a total of over a dozen courses within a ten-month period.

Works studied include articles, online sources, programs on mindfulness, and the following books: *Full-Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Mindset* by Carol Dweck, *Fully Present* by Susan Smalley and Diana Winston, *Mindfulness* by Ellen Langer, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhat Hanh, *Mindful Games* by Susan Kaiser Greenland, *The Way of Mindful Education* by Daniel Rechtschaffen, *Nonviolent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg, *Mindsight* by Daniel J. Siegel, *Self-Compassion* by Kristin Neff, *Search Inside Yourself* by Chade-Meng Tan, *Alone Together* by Sherry Turkle, *Habits of the Creative Mind*

by Richard Miller and Ann Jurecic, *Teach, Breathe, Learn* by Meena Srinivasan, *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness* by Deborah Schoeberlein David, and *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer.

### **~ 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 enrolled in a ten-month intensive practice program 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." Through the Intensive Practice Program, I completed over a dozen classes in mindfulness, attended half a dozen six-hour workshops in mindful awareness practices, and a week-long silent retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin, CA.

### **~ 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.

In the course of studying and writing an annotated bibliography about mindfulness, I kept a learning journal to document my own writing process for self-reflection, metacognition, and further exploration. This learning journal allowed me to present a model for their own learning journals, which I incorporated into my English 1A courses as a key component of cultivating habits of minds that contribute to student

success in college composition and beyond. In addition, upon completion of my sabbatical project, I themed my English 1A courses with mindful awareness practices, using as a primary text, *Fully Present*, authored by UCLA neuroscience professor Susan Smalley and Diana Winston, director of UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center.

### **~ Educational Videos**

My original plan was to create short educational videos to offer in my entirely online sections of English V01B has been extended to upcoming semesters because the focus of my teaching upon returning from my sabbatical has been on English V01A, for which I have curated a series of short educational videos from mindfulness experts who can provide more engaging presentations of mindfulness than I can in my limited resources. In addition, as I have deepened my mindfulness practice and completed (December 2018) my Training in Mindfulness Facilitation at UCLA, as well as incorporated mindful awareness practices in four sections of English 1A, I've come to understand the profound value of the teacher embodying her own practice when it comes to mindfulness. Hence, I am working on making audio and video recordings for my online English V01B that could best approximate an authentic presence to create a virtual community of inclusion and equity.

### **Value of Sabbatical Project to VCCCD and Ventura College**

My project places high value on being of benefit to the Ventura County Community College District and Ventura College. Helping students to improve their mindset and providing our diverse learners with mindfulness strategies will help improve college-level 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 wrote the

application for a series of 3CSN Growth Mindset & Habits of Mind with Guided Pathways workshops that two other English faculty and our division dean attended, and this has led to promoting Guided Pathways at Ventura College with a Growth Mindset, which will continue in the 2019-2020 school year and beyond.

### **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. I have offered these tools to students in my mindfulness-themed English 1A courses, and student response has been exceptionally positive and meaningful.

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. Though 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 and anxiety, I have been profoundly moved by the sincere expressions of kindness,

compassion, and open-heartedness that my students have shared with me. Presenting students with simple yet profoundly beneficial mindfulness tools has been rewarding to say the least.

### **Value of Sabbatical Project to the Instructor**

The year before my sabbatical, I had a health scare that required surgery and a short hospital stay. Toward the end of my sabbatical, I had another health scare that also required surgery, but because my mindfulness practice had deepened and strengthened, my recovery felt relatively easy compared to my situation in the previous year. In the classroom with my English 1A students, however, is where I have felt the true benefit of having studied and practiced mindfulness, which has allowed me to approach my students with mindsets of growth, openness, flexibility, creativity, empathy, and metacognition. In return, I have received kind attention and sincere effort from students more than ever before. Thank you for the opportunity to engage in this professionally and personally beneficial project.

Respectfully yours,  
Henny Kim-Ortel