

Ventura College Sabbatical Leave Proposal
Curriculum Development and Enhancement Project for Spring 2020
Submitted by Jim Maritato - Associate Professor, Communication Studies
November 1, 2018

Instructor's Sabbatical Leave Status:

Full-time hire date: August, 2012

Previous Sabbaticals: 0

Background of Sabbatical Project

The Communication Studies department of Ventura College faces several challenges, given the administrative need to improve the productivity of the college's course offerings by increasing class sizes in addition to recent policy changes at the state level with regards to the Oral Communication requirement for CSU/IGETC transfer. These challenges leave the Communication Studies department (and in particular, its courses focused on public presentation and advocacy) with the need to adapt to changing contexts and expectations. My desire to engage in a sabbatical leave follows these shifts in policy, as I am seeking to identify and implement methodologies to improve classroom instruction while addressing the challenges posed by these changes.

The first of these changes was implemented three years ago, as administrators increased the cap size for courses meeting the oral communication requirement from 30 students to 32 in COMM V01 (Introduction to Speech Communication – the department's "bread and butter" public speaking course) and from 30 to 35 in all other courses, such as COMM V10 (Argumentation & Debate). For example, as the principle instructor of COMM V10 on the Ventura College campus, this meant that I was now working with ten additional students in my two argumentation courses, and four to six total additional students in my COMM V01 courses, depending on the mix of courses I teach per semester.

While this change in class size may seem small, Communication Studies courses require students to make multiple presentations during class sessions, and to be evaluated by the instructor in front of the other students, who serve as a multicultural public audience. Whereas in some disciplines an additional five students might mean that an instructor has more papers, exams, or homework submissions to evaluate outside of class, adding students to public presentation and advocacy courses requires that the instructor *reschedule class time to accommodate the number of students who need time to speak during class sessions*. The amount of time in the semester is finite, and the semester does not become longer when more students are added – thus instructors must make choices to eliminate *something* from the course to accommodate these students – be it in-class practice time, chapters of material or concepts to be covered, etc.

The one thing that certainly cannot be eliminated or reduced is the number of presentations required, as our course outlines of record indicate that students should be presenting a minimum of four presentations. Thus, reducing the number of presentations or evaluations each student prepares is not an option open to instructors if the courses are to continue to articulate and meet transfer credit models. Given that each student will use a minimum combined total of 30 minutes of active class time just for their graded presentations (not including practice time in class that also needs to be scheduled), the addition of five students means 150 minutes within the semester that need to be allocated for their speeches. In a course meeting for 75 minutes each session, one entire week of classroom instruction must be reallocated from the presentation of other content so that all students can make their four presentations. This estimate also does not account for other work students may do in front of the class, such as practicing, proposing topics, collaborating in workshops, etc. If there are emergencies or events on

campus that require cancelling or rescheduling material (e.g. participation in campus safety drills, ceding classroom time to measuring student engagement for grant completion purposes, etc.), these classes are deeply affected.

As class sizes are increased across our campus and the district at large, facilitating these courses in contexts where students have the opportunity to practice and succeed is becoming unsustainable – especially given that our population includes many students who struggle with basic skills and/or are living in situations of hardship and thus struggle to meet rigid deadlines, etc. Because of the time constraints these larger class sizes create, instructors have less time to accommodate students with different levels of experience in speaking in public or with varying degrees of communication apprehension. Because the courses must be run on a strict schedule, where the emphasis is on making sure the speeches get completed to ensure there is enough time for everyone to speak, the learning contexts become more stressful, challenging, and less forgiving of mistakes made by beginning speakers. In essence, our learning context is at risk of becoming one where instructors have to expect students to teach themselves to be proficient speakers based on whatever work they are putting into practice or development at home, without adequate time for the instructor to help them develop if they have significant anxiety, apprehension, or cognitive challenges that impact their ability to communicate in public. This sets up those who have the greatest likelihood of experiencing trouble speaking in public with an even greater degree of challenges to overcome.

Beyond the impact of increasing class sizes, a second policy change in need of attention is that the California State University Chancellor's office acted via executive order in Spring of 2018 to declare that schools within the CSU system are now required to accept transfer credits for classes regardless of the delivery method of the course. This created confusion within the Communication Studies discipline across the state, as the current IGETC/CSU transfer standards explicitly state that coursework for oral communication courses must be completed directly in front of the instructor of record and that student presentations must be evaluated in a public context. While Ventura College's Distance Learning Committee and administrators affiliated with Distance Learning initiatives have been strongly encouraging the Communication Studies program to offer courses online or in hybrid models, the road ahead on how to do so while adhering to the established IGETC transfer requirement standards is somewhat unclear. Though some schools in the state have begun to offer oral communication courses online, there has been disagreement within the discipline as to how these courses may best be designed to be accessible online, while also meeting the existing IGETC transfer standards. Moreover, with the exception of a limited number of materials for the public speaking course, implementing an online or hybrid model of Communication Studies classes requires developing almost all instructional resources from scratch because of the lack of comparable courses being taught online in the field and thus the lack of available "off-the-shelf" modules, online teaching solutions, etc. Currently, no online educational resources exist for courses in argumentation and advocacy, and the discipline generally lacks accessible and effective multimedia/video resources to support hybridized, flipped, or online teaching.

Purpose of Sabbatical Project

The principle goal of this project is to develop necessary resources to "flip" elements of content delivery in COMM V01 and COMM V10 in order to maximize the class time allocated for actively developing, rehearsing, and presenting the required assignments in the course. In particular, I am seeking to develop instructional videos, "demo" speeches, and other multimedia content that would support these two courses. During my participation in Ventura College's SITE program several years ago, emphasis was placed on utilizing multimedia content to flip classroom instruction, and participants were asked to produce a video teaching a valuable skill from their discipline. I used this opportunity to produce a

“pilot” episode of a web series that used humor, multimedia graphics, and step-by-step visual instructions to teach viewers the basic steps in writing “signpost” phrases to transition between key ideas in a speech. The video was designed to fit within the ecosystem of YouTube, and to blend entertainment and education to offer video lessons in the “snackable” format of short form content that contemporary students interact with on their phones each day. A primary goal of this project will be to further develop this concept to generate modular videos that break down speech writing, researching evidence, advancing an opening argument, and engaging in point-by-point refutation. A second goal of this project will be to investigate how other colleges that have already begun their foray into online and hybridized models are making use of interactive tools and video content in order to identify successful models for consideration at Ventura College.

Components of Sabbatical Project

As discussed above, the project has two distinct goals, in that I will work to develop content for flipping the delivery of course curriculum for COMM V10 and COMM V01, while also working to understand what methodologies are already being applied by institutions that have begun offering hybrid or online models of presentation-driven classes meeting the oral communication requirement. This will involve:

- Interviewing faculty at other community colleges in the state to identify the methods and resources they use to teach Communication Studies in an online, hybrid, and/or flipped mode
- Storyboarding and writing short (10 minute or less) video-based lessons that are “task oriented” or “concept-oriented” to assist with the development of speeches and argumentative cases
- Presenting the lessons on camera and shooting necessary video content
- Editing videos to provide supplemental text / visual reinforcement of discussed content
- Rendering videos and converting to compressed streaming formats for convenient use via mobile platforms/Canvas
- Developing Canvas modules that integrate the video content and provide a structured way of navigating resources
- Developing of new workshop activities for writing, researching, organizing, and practicing presentations in class
- Studying and developing models for how these resources might be additionally applied for hybridized methods of teaching COMM V01 and COMM V10 in future semesters

The proposed sabbatical would take place during the Spring 2020 semester. This date is requested as it will be least disruptive to my department as it would happen outside of the observation period for a colleague’s tenure process. Secondly, as I am the only instructor of COMM V16 (Mass Communication) and the only day time instructor for COMM V10, I would be able to “frontload” the teaching of those specialty courses by working with the department chair to offer more sections of those courses in Fall of 2019 to meet student needs toward matriculation. Alternately, this would provide the time to collaborate with my department on hiring or curriculum assistance for hourly faculty needed to cover those courses in my absence.

Value of Sabbatical Project to the Ventura College and the VCCCD

At a “brass tacks” level, there is a connection between students who succeed in oral communication courses and the college’s matriculation rates, because every student who completes a degree or certificate program at Ventura College must complete the oral communication requirement to successfully finish their course of study at our institution. Beyond the many sections of COMM V01 offered to help students complete the oral communication requirement, COMM V10 is instrumentally involved in the degree

requirements that many students on campus need to complete. This is because it not only fulfills the oral communication requirement, but also fulfills the English/Critical Thinking requirement (in lieu of English V01B), and is additionally required for pre-law pathways students, Communication Studies majors, etc. The course must thus be many things for many people. Running a course with too many people for the time allocated and four different sets of goals to attain is stressful for the instructor and the students – especially without the needed resources to flip it at the ready.

In essence, this sabbatical project would attempt to realign courses with the enrollment changes the college has already made in order to make these courses sustainable to teach and able to adapt to the challenges of a community college campus and population. The strategies and video resources the project yields can also be shared at the department level to help other faculty create the time and space for student development. The college and the district have also been seeking to maximize the potential number of students these courses can reach and have inquired about hybridizing oral communication courses or delivering them online. Engaging this project will allow me to report back to stakeholders with regards to distance education norms and practices in the state. Moreover, the project will yield the curricular resources necessary to present information online in an engaging manner – such that if hybrid or online models are developed at Ventura College in the future, there will be resources to facilitate them.

Value of Sabbatical Project to the Students of Ventura College

It may come as no surprise to readers of this proposal that many students approach a public speaking course (be it argumentation or an introductory speech course) with trepidation. For many students, these courses mark the first time in their adult lives that they have had to stand in front of a group of people and express their ideas. As the college is an identified Hispanic-Serving Institution, some students are attempting to complete this task in a language that is not native to them. As much as we aspire to create “safe spaces” for education, public presentation courses can feel inherently stressful for students, because they are engaged in an activity that is new for them in front of many people. Improving the amount of class time that can be utilized to help students overcome these issues through practice, collaborative peer review, and hands-on skills application would foster a greater opportunity for these students to succeed. Every student who completes a degree or certificate program at Ventura College must complete the oral communication requirement as part of their degree track. This project stands to benefit a great number of students by altering the dynamic in which they learn to better meet them at their competency level, rather than expect them to quickly adapt to the contexts yielded by recent policy changes.

Value of Sabbatical Project to the Instructor

While my background as an educator includes experience designing and implementing open-access college debate tournaments entirely via online platforms and experience in video production, rhetoric, and media studies, I have not had an opportunity to put these skills to use on our campus (which is almost ironic, given that these skills were notable reasons that I was selected for hire in the first place). A project that allows me to reconnect with skills I am adept at and that enhances my effectiveness as an instructor would be fulfilling. Beyond mere interest in practicing my skills, this project is an opportunity to “reset” the way I am teaching my courses to derive more personal satisfaction from the work in which I am engaged. At present, the need to be perpetually chasing deadlines while defending the time we have from outside distractions, interruptions, etc. and rigidly enforcing course policies to ensure we can complete all of the speeches in a semester is not rewarding or fulfilling. On a personal level, the current time and class load pressures lead to more heartache over students who are not meeting the context/expectations, while knowing that given their skill level coming into the course, the instructors and students all need more practical application time together to help them succeed when speaking in an environment with genuine

stakes in the real world. In short, I would like to use this project as an opportunity to re-energize my approach to teaching, and to find the vital time needed in class for learning driven by compassion, understanding, and personal growth.

Thank you to the committee for your time and consideration of this proposal. Should you have any questions, please feel free to ask.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jim Maritato". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end.

Jim Maritato
Associate Professor – Communication Studies