

Ventura College Sabbatical Leave Proposal for Fall 2022

"Targeting Equity Using Inquiry-based Learning and Contract Grading: The Need for New Scaffolding under Acceleration"

Submitted by Sumita Lall
English Department
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Instructor's Sabbatical Leave Status:

Full-time hire date: August 2007 at VC, August 2006 at OC

Part-time district hire date: June 2005 at VC, August 2005 at OC

Previous Sabbaticals: 1

Background of the Sabbatical Project

If I've discovered anything in my over twenty-five years of teaching, it's that learning is social: relationships, contexts, and experiences in and out of my classroom determine a student's ability to assimilate knowledge, develop strengths, address challenges, and eventually succeed. Prior to the passing and implementation of Assembly Bill 705 (signed October 2017) intended to "maximize[] the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and mathematics within a one-year timeframe," I relied heavily on my research, ongoing trainings, and teaching experience in developmental education – namely English 3 and 2 at VC and English 68 and 96 at OC – to provide the conditions of possibility for social learning to happen and gain traction with students, namely the time afforded by and valued in the sequence of courses we once had in place at Ventura College. I held sacred the belief that, when done right, developmental education could provide the time and space required for students to cultivate the relationships, regulate the environments, and seek the experiences needed to discover their learning gifts and needs and gain a sense of agency. I readily collaborated with programs I considered the remaining pillars of the developmental model: the EAC, student services like counseling and tutoring, and our once thriving ESL and reading programs, hoping that if I provided enough scaffolding of challenging yet relevant content, skills development, and contact points for socialization with fellow peers and services/programs, a student who may have struggled on a first essay, for example, could significantly improve by the second and gain enough confidence in their skills to enroll in transfer-level English.

Then VC implemented AB 705 in fall 2019 to address the fact that "Students of color ... are disproportionately placed into the lowest levels of remediation" (Katie Hern and Myra Snell 27) with poor throughput rates into transfer-level English, a trend I had already sensed from a cursory glance at my developmental student populations over the years, but also one that led me to question whether my support of the developmental model was contributing to inequitable student outcomes for black and Latinx students. I knew the link between race/ethnicity, socioeconomic disadvantage, and lack of access to supportive schools, teachers, and resources K-12 contributed to students of color disproportionately finding themselves in my developmental classrooms, but I also started to question my own complicity in enabling structures that depended on racist assumptions, practices, and systems. Was my own support of the developmental model in higher education preventing retention of these students? While I had faith in my own teaching choices at the English 2 and 3 levels, always treating those courses as "mini-transfer level" experiences with challenging but level-appropriate readings and shorter but equally rigorous

essay work, I immediately sensed that all the curriculum-related and pedagogical changes I could make at the individual level could never impact outcomes to the degree that policy could, and so I needed to reflect on whether I was supporting racist placement practices when allowing college assessment tests to funnel students, those who were mostly students of color, into my developmental courses. I was forced to ask if the very structure of developmental education – the multicourse sequence approach – was flawed.

As a teacher of color having consciously served students of color with equity in mind – examples include culturally responsive content, portfolio grading, student-centered rubrics, reading apprenticeship modeling, and whole-brain/embodied learning – my sense of purpose and vocation was, to say the very least, totally shaken. I faced an ethical dilemma I cannot answer to this day, but I also knew I wanted to avoid feeling resentful toward legislators, administrators, and colleagues who were arguing to pull me from my "home" in developmental education, and so I turned to professional development to help me adapt and address my own complicity in unequitable practices, particularly the following trainings and work opportunities:

- Involvement in **English 2 Portfolio** Pilot (fall 2015) and continuing participation in official portfolio assessments and **"1A common midterm" rubric-based assessment** through spring 2019
- **Faculty Academy** participant (spring and fall 2016) and subsequent involvement in FA presentations and workshops on equity at VC; presentation at ALAS Symposium called "What We Learned about Targeting Equity in Faculty Academy" (Nov, 2016); VC workshop conducted with Heather Ludwig-Aguilar called "What we do in the Sandbox: How Play Engages Students and Helps them 'Play Up' their Strengths" (fall 2016 and spring 2017, presented twice); Teaching and Learning Co-op (spring-fall 2017); *Courage to Teach* reading group (fall 2018);
- **Webinars** on "Sequencing Assignments," "Teaching Cultural Critiques," "Teaching Transformation," "Mimicry and Plagiarism," "William Glasser's Needs-based Learning," "Adaptive Technology in the Classroom," "Complete College, Math Pathways," "Integrating Critical Reading and Writing," "Thinking for Success in College," "Pedagogy of Multi-literacies: Strategies for Assessing Multimodal Projects," "Instilling a Critical Mindset," "Addressing Students' Affective Needs" and many more...
- **"Culturally Responsive Teaching"** workshop (spring 2017)
- **ALAS** Regional Writing Conference (spring 2016) and presentation submission for fall 2016; ALAS South Coast Writing Conference presentation (spring 2017)
- **Guided Pathways** retreats and roundtable discussions (spring and fall 2018)
- **"Teaching Men of Color in Community College"** (spring 2018)
- **"2019 On Course National Conference"** targeting student success strategies (spring 2019)
- **Reading Apprenticeship** courses and certifications (spring and fall 2019)
- **"Grading for Equity Webinar Series"** with Joe Feldman offered by CAP or the California Acceleration Project (October-November, four trainings 2021)
- **"Inquiry into Constructs that Instill a Culture of Dignity: Creating Conditions of Belonging & Psychological Safety for Students of Color"** with Diego Navarro (October, three trainings 2021)

Without time for research and mindful curriculum development while teaching these past several years since AB 705 was studied and implemented at VC, I have still felt that the trainings listed above planted the right seeds for personal reflection and research on topics related to pacing and scaffolding that could improve student learning and retention efforts.

Purpose of the Sabbatical Project

While reeling from what felt like AB 705's cataclysmic changes, I've been too busy teaching to reflect on the identity changes this policy thrust upon developmental practitioners who, like me, found themselves "*unhomed*" but eager to adapt so they could retain the essence of their original calling to empower students, especially in terms of teaching practices and strategies that promote equity under what currently feels like the accelerated learning conditions of AB 705. Ultimately, the purpose of my project is to research, design curriculum, and develop teaching strategies that increase student agency and identity formation in the eighteen weeks of my 1A (English Composition) course, a learning process I would previously have stretched from English 2 into the transfer course over the span of 36 weeks (two semesters). What students learned in my developmental courses was the value of investing time and effort in learning and practicing the skills needed of transfer-level writing. My pre-transfer courses forced pacing of this learning process on students that was delivered through careful scaffolding of exercises, activities and assignments that led to larger end-of-unit projects linked to topics explored more fully at the next composition level, and in pacing the work over two semesters, my students could essentially breathe their way through the demands of college writing and identity formation by seeking help from me and other campus resources (e.g. counseling, tutoring, EAC, and even ESL coursework) to address their own self-identified struggles.

Since fall 2019, however, I've experienced challenges trying to communicate to students the value of devoting time and making effort to cultivate this level of personal agency. Despite careful scaffolding in my English 1A courses of required enrollment in IDS N100 to seek tutoring and other concurrent supports as stated in AB 705, for example, these and other attempts – like the English program's encouragement to "choose your own support course" to address study skills meant to encourage corequisite or supplemental support (to take the place of developmental coursework) – have yet to gain traction with students. Without the research I plan to conduct and the teaching strategies I hope to develop during my sabbatical, I fear students will continue to seek ways to accelerate the learning process itself, bypassing our collective commitment to an incremental learning process – and sometimes an overwhelmingly time-consuming process because now a concurrent or corequisite demand on time and energy – under the accelerated transfer model that is our new norm. In other words, when students are no longer required to slow down and seek the help they need to address weaknesses in their skills and assimilation of content early enough in their transfer coursework, they often choose not to devote the time and energy those skills and content require, instead choosing to glean what they can from minimal commitment to attendance in class. In an active learning, skills-heavy course, attendance is just not enough. Nothing in my field of English composition can be lectured or presented in the form of content slides as quick-fixes for the struggles students might be experiencing.

I believe (1.) inquiry-based learning and (2.) grading contracts are two possible solutions I can implement in my English 1A classes to (1.) help students feel intrinsically motivated enough to pace their learning according to their self-identified needs and points of curiosity and (2.) remove conditions like the punitive "0" that can contribute to a culture of threat preventing

their sense of belonging in college. Both solutions match the best "take-aways" from my trainings these past several years and offer alternatives to the reward/punishment model of teaching and evaluation. I hope my research and development during my sabbatical will, in essence, give students their own forms of motivation, indeed inspiration points that work like self-identified carrots and sticks – something they crave from acculturation K-12 – they now choose for themselves in the span of the 18 weeks of English 1A.

Components of the Sabbatical Project

- 1.) **Inquiry-based learning (IBL)**, also called Problem-based learning (PBL), requires teachers to scaffold lessons in carefully planned sequences of tasks/exercises that promote active group collaboration to help students verbalize their thoughts but also provide the conditions for individual engagement and the development of needs-based choices. The goal of IBL is to encourage inductive reasoning around open-ended questions, hypotheses, experimental or trial-and-error processes and risk-taking or grappling with new ideas/content so students can develop self-initiated criteria for the development of higher order evaluation skills. One of its key components is the development of metacognitive skills (also part of my training in Reading Apprenticeship in 2019) that help students cultivate curiosity in response to challenging ideas and tasks. Instead of shutting down or running away from difficult content, students who tap into their own points of curiosity self-regulate their fight/flight responses and choose engagement instead.

I plan to research teaching strategies that encourage inquiry-based learning – so far, my participation in Faculty Academy during spring and fall 2016 taught me how to initiate a collaborative form of "open-ended questioning" as one inquiry-based learning strategy, and one I already use for research papers – to develop even more exercises I can use and share with colleagues across the curriculum. My most recent training with Dr. Diego Navarro over the past three weeks on the topic of "Inquiry into Constructs that Instill a Culture of Dignity: Creating Conditions of Belonging & Psychological Safety for Students of Color" has convinced me that curiosity and metacognition are coping mechanisms against bio-reactive responses that result from students sensing threat, and that a teacher can develop curriculum and teaching strategies that promote curiosity and metacognition as ways to increase a student's window of tolerance or sense of safety and belonging when encountering challenging concepts and tasks. Most of the trainings I've undergone since fall 2015 have reminded me of the importance of making our classrooms safe spaces for learning and belonging, and so my work on metacognitive skill development (using IBL as my framework) will help develop a larger repertoire of equity-minded practices in my classroom.

- 2.) **Contract grading** refers to a transactional/business relationship wherein the teacher clearly outlines performance tasks, each student chooses the performance level toward which he/she plans to work, and these tasks and choices align with each grade level in the assessment process. During my last sabbatical, I researched and created a student-centered rubric to be used in the English 2 (developmental) portfolio assessment process at VC and designed and shared teaching materials that aligned with the rubric's criteria. The goal was to encourage students to participate in the process of assessment using a "Self-Reflective Cover Letter for the Portfolio" arguing

for the rubric-based strengths exhibited in the student's work submitted for evaluation by English faculty using the same rubric. My first sabbatical was devoted to finding assessments that were more transactional than evaluative, a way to focus on student growth and attainable goals – because of rubric-fueled instruction – instead of performance measures arbitrarily created by teachers. My project was to research rubrics and assessment procedures that were bias-resistant and thereby more transparent and explicit about evaluative criteria, a way to lift the veil on grading and draw students into ongoing, semester-long conversations about the logic, purpose and practical end-goals or exit skills of "good writing." This research work helped me pitch to my students and colleagues the value of demystifying grading for teaching and learning purposes.

Since my last sabbatical, my colleagues in the English program have continued with collaborative portfolio assessment, but many have also evolved beyond evaluation of end-products like portfolios and adopted contract grading as part of their own commitments to equity. Right now, because of my heavy teaching load overlapping with my desire (obsessive compulsion?) to research and reflect before making a paradigm shift (and contract grading truly is that kind of seismic shift because it shakes up teaching identity so violently), I'm feeling like I'm always trying to catch up, frantically asking questions of early adopters during trainings and finding articles to read for background to feel more grounded in this desired change. (My desire for preparation before taking a leap is probably why it took me so long to finish my Ph.D. dissertation!) My colleagues have mostly raved about the transformational results they have experienced as a result of taking the plunge into contract grading, especially in terms of their students' sense of internal motivation to learn new content and practice required skills but also their own rejuvenation as teachers now focused on growth and process over performance measures and end-products. Students' and teachers' expectations are slowly shifting to raise the bar in more democratic ways, and I want to be part of that shift.

My training in "Grading for Equity" with Joe Feldman over the past month of October is my most recent inspiration for exploring the solution of grading contracts, and the sabbatical leave would grant me time and space to research, develop and address the problems inherent to traditional grading systems on the 0-100 percent scale (the system I currently use and know well). If schools are indeed assimilating mechanisms based on restrictive norms that teach to the "A" student, traditional grading simply reinforces the racial, ethnic, class and gendered norms rewarded or punished by those systems. During my sabbatical I plan to read and study Joe Feldman's *Grading for Equity* and more closely tend to Zaretta Hammond's *Culturally Responsive Teaching* to upend and completely transform my grading system. The new system will be modeled after the "contract" concept but also has to match my identity as a teacher. As someone who finds it hard to improvise while teaching, I feel I need this sabbatical to

- interview my colleagues at VC, OC and MC who have developed a contract grading system,
- research different options teachers have used across the U.S., and finally
- develop my own system that is compatible with my values and aspirations as a teacher.

I know this much: a gradebook can track student learning, but it must stop being my vehicle for communication. I would much rather engage in conversation with my students about the rubric-

based feedback I’ve offered on essays and encourage students to review rubric-based lessons covered and practiced in class during lectures, discussions and in-class writing exercises. Conversation about feedback and scaffolded exercises is so much more important than the grade itself, and yet students who struggle the most in achieving passing grades – those who have most probably encountered years of punitive zeros as formative and summative grades – are least likely to adopt these democratic values unless curriculum and teaching strategies help them see their own value as active learners in the course.

Value of Sabbatical Project to Ventura College and District

The purpose of this sabbatical project is precisely to offer interventions that could potentially lead to increased retention within the English program and positively impact retention across campus for the large number of students (approximately 75%) who would normally have assessed into developmental classes but are now taking transfer-level English. Having taught fulltime at Oxnard College, mostly in the capacity of developmental education, I have cultivated relationships with colleagues who express equal apprehension at the identity shifts AB 705 has initiated, and so I hope my research will be of value to them to faculty in our district who are feeling uprooted despite their valuable contributions to equitable teaching practices. In focusing on IBL’s benefits in the classroom and also sharing research on contract grading, I hope to popularize solutions to that feeling of suspension teachers across the district may be feeling post-AB 705. Both components help to transform spaces on our campus that could feel threatening to students, such a skills-heavy classroom like English 1A for those who would have tested into a developmental course prior to fall 2019 or those who received lower GPA scores in high school, into spaces that welcome greater investment in the learning process. As VC’s Faculty Academy mentor-leader Cynthia McDermott stated during one of our sessions in fall 2016, “Anyone can ask a question.” IBL taps into this sense of agency, naturalizing a learning process that may otherwise have felt artificial and performed. Students transitioning from transfer-level English into their chosen programs of study will gain a sense of confidence because they will be learning skills like honoring curiosity and using metacognition that are required across the curriculum, namely self-initiated engagement with challenging content, collaborative problem-solving, developing intuition, making conjectures, and synthesizing ideas using guided discussions. Contract grading similarly encourages students to own their strengths, recognize their challenges and make choices within their “zone of proximal development” explained by Vygotsky (1978). Learning, like literacy, is incremental and requires self-awareness and choice, and contract grading helps students work with the variables in their lives to make choices for success in school that seem manageable, thereby increasing self-regulation and coping that can also transfer as skills across the curriculum. Having taught fulltime at Oxnard College, I have cultivated relationships with developmental educators that are just as apprehensive

Value of Sabbatical Project to Ventura College Students

The two components of my project will offer classroom experiences that increase the conditions for curiosity and metacognition to thrive, two ways to help students gain agency, feel a sense of belonging, and meet their needs in more self-directed ways. Both components provide a means to help students recognize and tap into their own needs, experiences, and expectations, making learning contextual and reflective of their own interests, bases of knowledge (experiential, lived, learned, etc.), desires, and goals, for example the work that can be reasonably expected and completed to meet a contract in place. Teaching strategies inspired by IBL and scaffolding

created around contracts help to make the learning process more embodied, increasing student self-awareness in response to content that may seem unfamiliar or too challenging, but also more transparent in presenting the norms used to evaluate "good writing." Both components provide identification points – invitations into the learning and assessment process – to help them recognize assets while also drawing students into scholarship and academic discourse to forge new identities as "promotion-ready" (Dr. Navarro's words during my most recent training) or experts in the fields of their choosing. Ultimately, my project contributes to students achieving a greater sense of social mobility or the ability to defy (perhaps by simply recognizing) the norms and restrictions in place meant to exclude them from moving up the social ladder leading to greater personal success and confidence. IBL and contract grading also provide an interface for stronger teacher empathy or listening to student needs, concerns and circumstances that impact the learning process.

Value of Sabbatical Project to the Instructor

The pace of teaching can often feel so overwhelming that one rarely has time to embrace one's role as an institutional agent, much less increase the classroom conditions for greater empathy and stronger social bonds with students. Both components of my sabbatical research increase my own skills as a student advocate and faculty mentor, as IBL and contract grading allow me to empathize with my students in more profound and empowering ways. As Jason Okonofua argues, students need "supportive, trusting relationships to help them grow and improve" to inoculate them from the threats they perceive in higher education ("United States: Teacher Empathy ..." 3). At the most personal level, I hope my work at the 1A (Freshman Composition) level influences my approaches to teaching and learning at the 1B (Composition and Critical Thinking Through Literature) level and eventually even informs the work I do in the literature survey courses I also teach, like English 21B (British Literature from 1800 to present), and other lower-division literature surveys – like Women in Literature, African-American Literature, and Multicultural American Literature – I plan to teach in the future. Ultimately, I hope this work helps to

- solidify my sense of purpose and identity teaching in a post-AB 705 college landscape
- solidify two of the best practices I've gleaned from faculty trainings over the past seven years, and
- contribute to the college's efforts to put equity at the heart of instruction.

Having the time and space to research points of interest I've encountered in professional trainings, I hope to join an already robust team of practitioners in the English program showing leadership in the areas of equity, Guided Pathways, student-centered learning, and ongoing professional development.

I thank the committee for its time in reading my proposal for a sabbatical project and hope I have presented ideas that hold value for our district, college, and students.

Respectfully,
Sumita Lall