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ON SABBATICAL

From Data Gathering to Classroom Policies: Reflecting on My First Sabbatical

Lisa M. Litterio

Sabbatical is a significant pause from the typical academic cycle of a professor. Mine came in the fall of 2019, directly after my tenure and promotion. It was a welcome reprieve from an overloaded email inbox, recharge from committee and service work, advising, and teaching responsibilities. After crafting a succinct but firmly worded auto-away message, I began my sabbatical project: conducting research focused on the subfield of Composition and Rhetoric, particularly the area of Online Writing Instruction (OWI). I am exploring the effectiveness of online writing, the pedagogy of digital spaces, and how digital platforms can align with teaching writing concepts

Even though I elected for a fall sabbatical, it did not start on September 1st. I started planning out a course of action earlier over the summer, as I drafted an IRB proposal for a national survey targeted at OWI instructors, some of whom are teaching at universities similar to Bridgewater, and also those at community colleges and research institutions. I corresponded with Elizabeth Spievak, IRB Chairperson, who helped advise me how best to disseminate my online survey and consider various recruiting techniques. In mid-September, when I had difficulty recruiting enough participants, I connected with several instructors

through listservs and even the administrator of an OWI Facebook page, who helped me to gather over 100 responses. Concurrently, sabbatical allowed me to read more research in these areas, including *High Impact Practices in Online Education*.

In November, I closed the survey and began to evaluate the Likert scale and open-ended questions from participants, developing codes based on frequency of response. I noted surprising findings, including how respondents were primarily instructors who have been teaching online for more than 6 years and nearly 50% identified as self-taught rather than formally trained. Among instructor feedback of online courses, they ranked engagement,

organization, collaboration, and multimodal (video, audio, web-based) elements as most effective to a successful online writing course. I created a formal report along with action items related to faculty training, course structure, and student feedback.

Even though sabbatical is meant to be a time to embrace being away from the university, it is impossible to extricate oneself fully from BSU. I might have been physically away, but my research caused me to reflect more deeply about my teaching. I discarded syllabi and crafted new assignments. I attended and presented at the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education's Conference in Pittsburgh in November where I listened to Dr. Michelle Miller's keynote about learning myths and how to finally relinquish the "no laptops in the classroom" to adapt more universal design in my face-to-face classes. Sabbatical helped me become re-energized to enter my courses with more reflective teaching techniques; and it also created the much needed time to make progress toward my larger research goal that will not only impact our institution, but also my field of study.



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