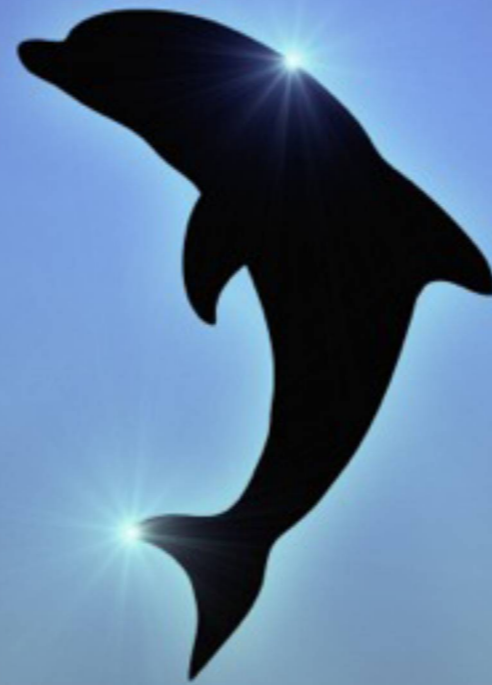


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in First Year Composition
at California State University
Channel Islands
Sabbatical Report
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Project Overview

My sabbatical allowed me to delve more deeply into [High Impact Practices](#) (HIP) for increasing student engagement and success that I have been exposed to through a variety of professional development activities at California State University Channel Islands (CI), including [Project ISLAS](#) and the [Blended Learning Preparation Program](#) (BLPP). My primary focus was to seek ways of using digital tools to enhance student learning, particularly among the first generation college students who compose the bulk of the students we encounter in First Year Composition (FYC) courses at CI.

As a full-time lecturer and coordinator of the First Year Composition Program at CI, my role at the University has been an unusual one, balancing an intensive teaching load with administrative responsibilities that extend well beyond the 10-month academic year. I am passionately committed to the ongoing growth and assessment of our FYC program and all that goes into

facilitating its distinctive features. At the same time, the sabbatical provided me with an invaluable opportunity to step away from the day to day demands of my position to reflect on and reevaluate my own teaching and our program as a whole.

I titled my project ***Shore to Shore*** to signify the spirit of lifelong learning and exploration that informs my own journey as an educator, my approach to navigating the first year composition program, and the excursion we guide our students through each year as they leave the familiar seas of high school English courses to chart the seemingly dark and foreboding waters of college writing and research.

Part I: Program Assessment

Context

My work began with a Program Assessment that concentrated on the efficacy of our Directed Self Placement (DSP) Program. DSP is one of the cornerstones of our program, and our qualitative observations have indicated that it is indeed a much more successful alternative to placing students in first year writing courses than the CSU's [English Placement Test](#) (EPT). Nonetheless, a quantitative assessment of DSP had not been conducted since our WASC accreditation in 2007. A new study was needed, not only as part of our ongoing program assessment, but also because such data are integral to the reaccreditation process that is currently underway.

Goal

I specifically sought to test the hypothesis that our DSP program promotes improved student success in

composition relative to the default success predictions from the EPT.

Holistic Team Scoring at CI

Composition assessment at CI utilizes blind, holistic, team scoring wherein composition faculty (who are not a student's instructor) evaluate a student's portfolio of written work. All writing is assessed via a six-point scoring rubric by two separate faculty members. Portfolios that receive scores that differ by more than one point receive a third reading by another faculty member.

Methods

I collected the student portfolio scores from 620 students enrolled in our first year composition courses over the 2012-2013 AY to evaluate student writing success. Herein I defined "writing success" to be having successfully passed their culminating FYC class (ENGL 103, 105 or 106). I contrasted this success rate with the default CSU standard evaluation tool that is the normal instrument used to shunt students into either remedial writing or college level courses: the EPT. I

conducted a paired *t*-test to determine if realized student performance differed from the default prediction.

Results

Our DSP-based program significantly improved student success ($p < 0.001$). At CI, 95% of our students were able to successfully complete their first year requirement. This stands in stark contrast to the 39% of First Time Freshmen (FTFs) deemed “Not Proficient” in English by the EPT and therefore predicted to be unable to successfully complete first year writing without first completing remediation. To be sure, multiple factors play into our students’ performance. Our realized student performance within our full year Stretch Composition sequence melds with other supporting features of our program such as small class sizes, Writing Center resources, and engagement of full time composition faculty. Together, these various factors work together to enable our students to well outperform EPT predictions.

Impacts

This assessment has proven to be a valuable resource at all levels of our administration and has been disseminated widely across campus as well as to others in the CSU who have been studying DSP. Other CSUs continue to follow our lead in implementing DSP on their own campuses, and now at least one other program here at CI is considering implementing its own version of DSP for STEM students based on our success to date.

The Perspective Afforded by my Sabbatical

Evaluating DSP during my sabbatical underscored the important of the collaborative teamwork that is at the heart of the first year composition program. The composition program has proven to be quite resilient over the years, even in times of significant fiscal strife, because of the flexibility and commitment of its faculty. Now that we are in a growth period once again, we are adding new faculty every year who need to be acclimated to the unique responsibilities of teaching in this interactive, collaborative framework. When the bulk

of a student's grade is determined by a portfolio score administered by members of the composition faculty other than that student's classroom teacher, it is clear that faculty in our program cannot function as "lone wolves" in the manner that is so often the case for other college writing teachers.

Part II: Faculty Training & Development

The next stage of my project built upon the insights gained from my critical evaluation of DSP and involved exploring ways to best support the training of new composition faculty and the ongoing professional development of veterans. The dynamic nature of our program, and the continuous assessment that portfolio scoring provides, means that our program is never in a period of stasis. We are constantly evolving, analyzing what we have been doing to determine what features continue to serve our program and our students, and which need to be retooled or rethought. We are never content to do things “the way they always have been done,” and during my time as composition coordinator I have been committed to helping facilitate our ongoing growth and evolution. The sabbatical, however, allowed me time and space to be more reflective about where we had been in our first decade as a composition

program and where we wanted to go in our second decade.

My work in this area included a fully updated handbook for faculty in the first year composition program at CI. This handbook is an invaluable orientation and training tool for new faculty who are joining our program and need to be brought up to speed on its history, philosophy, and current practices and policies. At the same time, veteran faculty also frequently consult this resource. The handbook is essential to maintaining consistency of standards across all of our sections of first year writing, and it is in a format that can be readily updated as we continue to evolve and grow.

I also explored various digital tools for facilitating collaboration and communication among our composition faculty throughout the semester, preceding our end of the term portfolio scoring sessions. The Blended Learning Preparation Program (BLPP), led by Jill Leafstedt, Director of Teaching and Learning Innovation, introduced me to a variety of tools for enhancing student learning, and it was clear to me that these tools had potential for faculty development as

well. During my sabbatical, I was also fortunate to be able to take the three Online at CI faculty development courses taught by our Instructional Technologist for Blended & Online Learning, Michelle Pacansky-Brock. Both of these programs were transformative for my teaching in a number of ways, and they also helped reinforce the value of faculty interaction and the ways in which digital tools can help facilitate asynchronous conversations and collaborations.

This semester, I am putting what I learned into practice with my own program, essentially adapting the online teaching models that Jill and Michelle provided into faculty development and support for our first year writing faculty. The CI Community Page I had developed for our composition team several years ago has been enhanced and updated to include tools such as Google Docs and VoiceThread. Faculty use these tools to provide feedback on one another's writing assignments and to discuss sample student portfolios during the course of the semester. A "Virtual Watercooler" provides a forum for faculty to check in with one another, share our challenges and successes

in the classroom and learn from our collective experiences and wisdom. Although our conflicting teaching schedules make it difficult to hold face to face meetings with the entire composition faculty over the course of the semester, these tools enable us to stay connected and take advantage of the amazing resource that a team setting like ours provides.

Like all faculty development opportunities, these tools and resources are designed to help composition faculty become more effective teachers with the intention of helping increase student engagement and success. My sabbatical allowed me to understand more deeply how empowering and supporting faculty results in empowered and supported students. Now that CI seems to be admitting exponentially more FTFs each year, our program needs to be able adapt to these increased numbers of students and ongoing integration of new faculty. The online professional development model that I explored in my sabbatical provides an ideal template for our composition faculty, and we are now seeking ways to implement these tools in the larger English Program as well.

Part III: Enhancing Student Engagement in FYC

At the center of all these pursuits was of course, the student. Studying the efficacy of our composition program, and developing tools and resources for faculty support and collaboration, provided a framework and context from which to explore ways of enhancing student engagement in our first year writing courses. This work was inspired by what I learned in BLPP and the [Online at CI](#) training about the power of visually oriented, easily accessible, digital tools for improving student learning.

My efforts were also largely informed by the principles and practices of Project ISLAS with regard to High Impact Practices (HIP) for increasing retention and success of first generation college students at a [Hispanic Serving Institution](#) (HSI).

The sabbatical allowed me to step back and perceive the ways in which the aims of these programs intersect and to explore methods of leveraging digital tools in the service of all students in our composition program, but especially those first generation students who face unique challenges and material constraints that can make the transition from high school to college a difficult one.

Because the faculty in our program collectively interact with the majority of incoming students who are facing these challenges, we are often the first line of defense for those students who may be at risk for not persisting at the University. And since our courses focus nearly as much on digital literacy as they do on written communication, we are all familiar with the digital divide that can further impede the success of students with less experience with or access to internet, computers, and so forth. My sabbatical work helped distill for me my ongoing, dual mission of utilizing digital tools to connect with students in new and engaging ways while at the same time meeting students where they are to

help them gain access and a comfort level with these technologies.

At the programmatic level, I put into practice what I have learned about reaching out to students with digital tools to develop a [new website for Directed Self Placement](#) for our incoming students. The website includes embedded videos that introduce students to our first year writing program and the role they will place in deciding for themselves whether to take our full year Stretch Composition Sequence or our accelerated one semester course. It also features an updated, online version of our DSP Handbook, which goes into more detail about the nature of our composition program and the factors students should take into consideration when making their choice. Students are provided with social media resources they can use to ask questions they have about our program as well as my email address should they have individual concerns.

I was able to get our website online in advance of the Summer 2014 Island View Orientation sessions so we could put them to use in our face face DSP presentations for students. Not only did the website

prove a valuable resource for students, but it also helped expose them to some of the digital and visual tools they are likely to encounter in our first year writing program. This year, I will work on updating the website and further enhancing the content and design so that it can be used by the Advising Center as they help incoming students enroll in classes.

My sabbatical also enabled me to launch a series of digital texts aimed at the students in our first year composition courses to help enhance their learning and increase their chances for persisting in our program. This is an ongoing project that will continue to expand as I learn more about the needs of our incoming students and the challenges they face not only in reading, writing, and conducting research at the college level, but also in learning to “navigate their own course” at the University and take responsibility for their own learning. Experience and data show us that succeeding in our first year writing program is determined by a student’s work ethic and habits of mind, and so much of the work in our program is focused on learning how to learn. These digital texts are designed to demystify the

college experience for students and to help them become more mindful of their own sense of agency as learners. I am piloting these texts with my own students this year so that I can retool them as needed before making them available to other faculty in our program.

I also took advantage of the time away from teaching in and administering the first year writing program to completely redesign my composition courses. Drawing upon what I have learned from BLPP, the Online at CI program, and Project ISLAS, I reevaluated the learning objectives should be completing in my courses and developed learning modules that clearly communicate to students what objectives they will fulfill in a module if they complete it successfully, the steps they will take and tasks they will complete to meet those objectives, and the rubrics that will be used to evaluate their performance for each learning objective. Every activity that students complete in a learning module can be tied to a specific objective so that it is clear to them that each assignment has a purpose that fits into our overall curriculum.

This course redesign also included the implementation of several digital tools and online apps for enhancing student engagement outside of the classroom. All teaching materials in my course -- [syllabus](#), learning modules, activity outlines -- are provided in a clean, visually appealing, digital format that students can access from a computer or mobile device. Students who have questions about their work in the class can now call or text me via Google Voice as well as through regular email. Students are also increasing their own digital literacy as they become accustomed to composing and responding to each other's papers in Google Docs and participating in class discussions via VoiceThread.

These tools are not about shortcuts or bells and whistles, but rather a way of more closely guiding students in their work for the class when we are not meeting face to face. The biggest challenge in helping students adapt to the University environment is helping them understand the amount of time they are expected to put into a class outside of the time we spend together in the classroom. Digital tools enable me to more clearly

define student out of class tasks while at the same time freeing up our face face time for the activities that are best facilitated in person, most notably with regard to discussing a student's own written work.

Final Reflections

Ultimately, my sabbatical enabled me to see ways in which making myself available to students, and creating a sense of community in my courses, will increase student accountability and success in my courses. Being student-centered means being present and accessible to students, both face to face and virtually. Having the opportunity to redesign my approach to teaching first year writing has helped me find ways to reach out to students throughout the school week and to make the most productive use of the time we have together in person. The spirit of innovation that inspired my sabbatical project continues to shape my own teaching as well as the spirit I strive to instill into my students as learners.

The sabbatical gave me the opportunity to devote my attention to becoming a more effective educator. Having the chance to reflect, re-evaluate, and rediscover my profession in new ways has been thoroughly energizing and motivating. One colleague described the enthusiastic attitude I have brought back to campus as

“infectious.” The time I spent away from CI helped reinforce for me how fortunate I am to teach at such an innovative, forward-thinking campus that provides so many ongoing opportunities for professional growth to its faculty. After nearly two decades of teaching college writing, I have learned that there are still so many more shores for me to seek, and I cannot imagine a time when I will ever settle into complacency and drop anchor.