

SABBATICAL REPORT

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March 29, 2021

I am very thankful to have been granted sabbatical leave during the fall 2020 semester. The timing, as well as the topics, for the courses I took could not have been more appropriate or significant, given the pivot to distance learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. During the fall 2020 semester, I completed two online, graduate-level courses through the California State University, East Bay (CSUEB) Online Teaching and Learning Certificate (OTLC) program. The two, three-unit classes I completed include: OTL 601/851 Introduction to Online Teaching and Learning and OTL 652/852 Instructional Methods for Online Learning. Each course provided information, resources, and tools that will help elevate my online instruction by developing strategies to help students feel motivated, engaged, connected, and ultimately more successful in the online learning environment. I thoroughly enjoyed these classes and earned an A in each one. A summary of course work completed in each class follows, as well as a description of how the OTLC courses will provide both personal and institutional benefits.

Summary of Coursework

Introduction to Online Teaching and Learning (OTL 651/851): All of the reading material for this 8-week course was online in the form of numerous journal articles, reports, websites, handbooks, and module lesson material. Each week we were expected to reply to a discussion prompt regarding the weekly readings and then reply to at least two classmates. In addition, we participated in 7 knowledge checkpoints to further demonstrate our understanding of the course material. Finally, we created 3 projects over the 8 weeks incorporating the information we had learned in the lessons. I found the projects to be quite valuable and have already started utilizing the content and concepts in my spring 2021 classes.

The first project was to create a class welcome letter for our online students. This allowed me to develop an informational greeting that would also serve as a Quick Start guide for my students. I utilized details about the role of the instructor, the implications of constructivism, and other lessons about how and when we learn in order to create the letter. My students will receive the letter prior to the start of the semester. They will know what to expect in their online environment and how to get started in the class. Additionally, the letter contains a list of valuable campus resources with active links to those sites.

The second project involved researching the issues and concerns students faced with the switch to a fully online learning environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. The feedback from the El Camino College survey administered during that spring semester reflected the data found in nation-wide surveys. Undergraduate students had a hard time staying motivated to learn online. They missed collaborating with their peers and receiving feedback from their instructors. My research informed me about establishing an online presence and creating more opportunities for collaboration, which fosters connection. Once this connection has been established, students tend to feel more engaged, which influences their motivation, and as a result, they are more likely to have successful learning outcomes.

The final project of creating an ePortfolio was by far my favorite. So much so, that I have offered the ePortfolio as one of the options for submitting the semester project in my spring 2021 classes. I loved the idea of showcasing one's newly acquired knowledge in such a way that it becomes a summary of the learning that has taken place and a place to reflect on that knowledge. I have developed a valuable new skill, in creating an ePortfolio. I found this project to be so beneficial that I have introduced it to my current students. My spring classes have already started

work on their semester projects and it is very satisfying to see their creativity in curating what they have learned.

The most significant elements of teaching online that I learned in this course were the teaching and learning theories of [Constructivism](#) and [Multiple Intelligences](#) theory as well as the “[Top 20 Principles from Psychology for pre-K to 12 Teaching and Learning](#)” published by the Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education and the American Psychological Association (APA). These principles can be applied to introductory college curriculum, including online learning. These perspectives have really informed the ways in which I am now presenting material in my classes, the ways in which I am assessing learning outcomes, and the ways in which my students are collaborating. The practical applications of these elements will be discussed in the final section of this report.

Instructional Methods for Online Learning (OTL 652/852): The reading material for this 8-week course was also completely online. The class went further into the foundational concepts of learning and examined the instructor-student roles and interactions. In addition, we explored instructional strategies, the importance of aligning formative and summative assessments with course objectives, and how to plan engaging activities. We were required to reply to weekly discussion prompts utilizing what we learned in the readings, and to reply to at least two classmates making references to the week’s readings. The final project involved designing a blueprint for our own online class where we outline our class activities and assessments. This included identifying the types of planned student interaction: Student-Instructor; Student-Content; and Student-Student.

One important aspect of designing and facilitating online learning is to provide a variety of ways for students to interact with the course material. Presenting the material in different ways that appeal to the learning styles of diverse learners and allowing for different modes of collaboration with peers means that students are more likely to develop an interest in the material. When students are interested there tends to be more motivation to participate on their part. Having an interest in the course material is viewed as a top priority for students. I was also introduced to the idea of being an educational coach, or a “guide on the side” rather than the “sage on the stage”. In this role the instructor provides activity based learning with peer interactions that promote self-discovery and self-learning. Finally, discovering instructional strategies that promote active learning was very beneficial. I learned how to develop activities that help students to engage the material through communication activities and the production of various types of projects. Building connections with their peers through student-student interaction is important to being successful in the online environment. I also designed activities that allow for some autonomy and self-direction to increase interest, engagement, and motivation.

Personal and Institutional Benefits

It had been 25 years since I was a graduate student. I had never taken online classes myself, yet I had been teaching online at El Camino for several years. I had no idea how much I would enjoy the OTL classes, the format, the topics, and the assignments. It felt so refreshing to indulge in reading and even in writing papers again. The creativity involved in producing my ePortfolio was very inspiring and it was also satisfying to see the culmination of my coursework in this format. Additionally, it has been exciting and rewarding to see the practical applications

of the OTL course material manifest in my spring 2021 module lessons, assignments, and class activities.

This sabbatical has allowed me to grow exponentially as an online instructor. Throughout my years teaching in the traditional classroom, I had always taken creative approaches to class assignments and various in-class team work activities and this evolution seemed organic to me. I did not understand how to incorporate these changes and social interactions into my online environment. Now, I have the knowledge, skill-set, and tools to give my Canvas classes a much needed make-over. This has even greater importance now that I will remain teaching fully online over the next year. Also, the spring 2021 classes that I am currently teaching are the ones that made the emergency pivot to distance learning last year and were in desperate need of restructuring. The benefits of taking this sabbatical, in terms of professional development, will translate to student success and ultimately into institutional benefits.

I believe that my students will benefit from my experiences in the CSUEB OTL program. The changes that I am now able to make to my online classes align with the College Mission of making a positive difference in people's lives by providing innovative, excellent programs. The updates will also address the Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILO) of developing critical thinking skills, becoming effective communicators, and demonstrating information literacy.

The three principles for education and learning (APA) that were most significant to me were developing a growth mindset, nurturing creativity, and using short-term goal setting. We have a diverse student population and the current environment of online learning has been imposed upon students who may not have opted for this mode of instruction. Underprepared students, older students, those improving on their English skills, and those who prefer in-person class meetings may lack confidence in their ability to learn online. They may hold low opinions

about their abilities. The psychological principle that was most meaningful to me is that of the growth mindset. Having a fixed mindset is limiting and creates a negative view of one's self and learning. I have included a brief TedTalk by Carol Dweck on growth vs. fixed mindset in my online orientation in order to start the semester on a positive note and set the stage for student success. This principle provides a strong foundation for learning because it is connected to motivation which is correlated with success.

I had been trying to foster creativity (and autonomy) in my face-to-face classes by using a variety of in-class team work activities and allowing students to select from several semester projects, but I had not developed these in my online classes. Combining assignment options with small group collaboration may lead to intrinsic motivation, which leads to a greater interest in learning and more success. This semester my online students now have the option to submit their semester projects as an ePortfolio, slides, or in the Canvas discussion board which serves as a virtual gallery. The team work activities I have developed serve as a scaffolding that prepares them for building their projects. There are short-term goals for completing the team work activities, and the semester project itself is broken down into 4 steps to be completed in phases throughout the semester. These smaller goals provide a record of progress which leads to greater success at achieving the long-term goals.

Active Learning encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and provides agency in the learning process. Students are empowered by having multiple ways to engage with the course material. This includes reading, writing, talking, listening, analyzing, and reflecting on course content. The assignments I am developing as a result of what I have learned in the OTL program will encourage both reflective, individual learning as well as collaborative learning. The activities feature gamification, reflective activities, and team work activities that include

icebreakers, online scavenger hunts, and mind mapping as low-stakes assignments that prepare them for each step of the semester project. The goal is to use these activities to engage students by incorporating experiences that will contribute to student motivation, agency, community building, and the achievement of learning objectives. In this way, what I have learned and started to apply in my online classes aligns with the College Mission statement and helps in achieving success in the Institutional Learning Outcomes.

I have been teaching full-time at El Camino College since 1999. If I had understood how rewarding sabbatical leave could be, I would have applied much earlier. I am so thankful to have had this opportunity for professional growth. It was truly and enjoyable experience that left me energized and enthusiastic about online teaching. I am eager to incorporate everything I have learned into my classes and have already begun to make exciting changes. I have successfully translated creative, fun class activities into the online environment. So far, I have seen some wonderful collaboration, great participation, and promising semester projects in the works. I hope to share some ideas with my department colleagues and we have already discussed the possibility of virtual “brown-bag” meetings to introduce the topics I have described here. I am very grateful to have had this experience. I will not wait 20 years before applying for sabbatical again!