

## **Spring 2019 Sabbatical Leave Report**

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**SABBATICAL REQUESTED:** I was very generously approved a semester sabbatical to independently research and study the art of storytelling in order to create a resource and potential unit for public speaking instructors at El Camino College. I divided my 16-week calendar into to three sections: a few weeks to collect materials, a slightly longer period to both read through the materials and compare the research findings, and finally, a few weeks at the end to, hopefully, create something I could use in my classroom this fall.

**SUMMARY OF WORK:** After I finished teaching my two Winter session classes and submitting my grades, I was anxious to get immediately started on my sabbatical project. I had actually already begun researching books about storytelling that I wanted to read, but I had not yet acquired them. Additionally, I had spoken with colleagues at other institutions about my project, and they had mentioned ideas of texts as well. So, my first week was spent mainly emailing, phoning, visiting libraries, and ordering items on Amazon. I wanted to ensure that I “cast a wide net,” but I did not want to overwhelm myself. I tried to keep my standards for source credibility consistent and above average. I sought out information on academic narrative theory, as well as storytelling from both the artistic and pragmatic perspectives.

At this point, I should probably clarify how people view storytelling differently. Some view storytelling purely as an artistic pursuit. Therefore, much like paintings, stories are to be admired for their beauty, and it’s okay if a story doesn’t have an explicit message or argument. Sometimes art is just art. Conversely, other people view storytelling as a practical tool to be used by humans to achieve a specific goal. From this perspective, all stories must have must

have a specific argument because a pointless story, like a broken tool, is useless. Christopher Anderson, the president of the TED organization, wrote, in his book on public speaking, that one of the top reasons that proposed TED talks are rejected is that the speaker's story has no central idea (67). Thus, some of the top-selling books are written about how to use stories (as tools) to sell products or motivate employees in the workplace. However, other books are *not* about using stories as tools, but focus on how to tell a stories that are merely entertaining. After a Moth competition, a storyteller articulated this perspective to me like this, "Why do people always have to demand for there to be a point to a story? Why can't it be enough to just move people? I just want to hear entertained, man. If there's point to the story, great. If not, who care. What's important to me is that I enjoyed myself and you didn't waste my time."

As March began, I had begun reading and had accumulated over a dozen high quality sources. Due to the semester deadline and knowing my own capabilities, I decided to end the "Collection" phase and totally commit to consuming the material. In my proposal, I referred to this next phase as the "Comparison" phase. My goal, as I read about how storytelling is taught, was to identify both "best practices" and potentially conflicting information. While doing so, I also began attending Moth competitions throughout Los Angeles.

The Moth is an organization that sponsors storytelling completions, similar to poetry slams, all around the country, with two simple rules: no written notes/script and a 5 minute time limit. Locations and dates can be found online. Venues usually have a general theme for the stories that evening, like "Food" or "Risk." When you arrive, you are allowed to put your name in the a bowl to possibly be picked to tell your story, but only ten people are usually selected. Random audience members are also selected at the beginning of the event to judge the competition. The storyteller with the highest ratings is asked to return on another specified date

for a “grandslam” competition on a different theme. Listening to these stories, hearing what how audiences reacted to stories, and learning who won the highest ratings was an interesting, educational, and fascinating peek into a subculture that I didn’t know existed, especially right here in Los Angeles.

When my deadline of May 15<sup>th</sup> arrived, I began synthesizing all of the information, as I entered the phase I labeled in my proposal as the “Creation” phase of my project, the final weeks devoted to creating what I hoped to use later in the fall. Overall, I designed a three-prong unit to be taught in my public speaking class in early weeks of the semester. Traditionally, most public speaking classes start by going over the syllabus on the first day and doing some sort of ice breaker exercise. Next, students are often randomly partnered with a fellow classmate and informed that their first speech will be to introduce their fellow classmate to the class. This exercise is obviously useful because it require students to get to know each other outside of class, and it allows them to give their very first speech with a friend standing beside them. After this speech, most speech classes usually use class time discussing topics such as the Model of Communication and Nervousness, while students prepare their second presentation of the semester, a narrative or storytelling s speech, outside of class. This presentation may take the form of “My Most Memorable Moment” or “The Time I Was At My Best.” It’s up to the instructor. However, it’s very common in public speaking classes, and it’s usually just a 3-4 minute personal story.

As I said in my sabbatical proposal, I did a quick, brief, informal survey of ECC speech instructors, and most of them had a “story speech” in their classes. Additionally, everybody said that they told their students that “a good story has a beginning, middle, and end,” but they gave

students no other information about storytelling. No instructor taught any other specific information about how to tell a story well.

My lesson plan was designed to be taught immediately after the introduction speeches. The idea is that “You’ve just done a great job telling us about your new friend, but now, we want to learn about *you*. What’s *your* story?” Then, the assignment is presented to establish an immediate need and is followed by lecture on the relevance of storytelling in today’s society. Next, I showed two specific Moth examples to students. These examples were chosen for their subject matter, length, humor, and variety. Students hopefully see both examples and get ideas of what they might do for the assignment. The next lecture is about how to tell a story well. The lecture starts with another example specifically chosen from Moth competitions. This story is more dramatic in nature and is followed by another one which more humorous, similar to the earlier examples. I then ask the students what the storytellers did well, and we write these ideas on the blackboard. I strategically place their ideas on the board for future reference, and afterward, I refer to them in lecture. The third part of the unit is short and focuses on how to prepare the story for performance. I prefer to start by showing a Moth story at the beginning and asking the students what they liked. Then, lecturing about how to prepare, and then, showing a video of a student telling a story. On youtube, it is very easy to find a student from another college doing a storytelling speech, and unfortunately, it’s not difficult to find a performance that would earn a C. I play the student speech. Then, I give my students a copy of my evaluation form and explain how I would have graded that student.

By the end of the Spring semester, my project was complete, and I tested it a few weeks ago, this past September. The students really enjoyed the Moth stories and seemed fascinated with the information on storytelling. However, even though the students were given more

information and had more time to prepare than in past semesters, their delivery wasn't necessarily stronger than in past semesters. The content of their stories was notably more interesting, but many of them seemingly needed more practice. Perhaps, in the future, while discussing how to tell a story well, students should maybe tell their story in class in small groups of five, to their classmates, a week ahead of time, to allow (make) them practice it once. I'm also considering the possibility of integrating storytelling from the very start of the semester. Instead of an "introduction speech," students would "tell a story" about their partner, followed by a speech where they "tell a story" about themselves, etc.

**PERSONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BENEFITS:** This fall marks my 25<sup>th</sup> consecutive academic year teaching public speaking, and I am honestly embarrassed at how long it's been since I have experimented with new teaching strategies. This sabbatical was such a blessing and gave me a wonderful opportunity to revive some passions I haven't felt in a long time. It's been years since I've had so many ideas for the classroom and even longer since I've tried to do one. I'm already making plans to expand on the storytelling lessons that I tried earlier this semester, and hopefully, after I've worked out the kinks, I want to share the entire unit with the other public speaking instructors in my department. I also hope to integrate storytelling lessons into the Interpersonal course as well, as studying storytelling relies heavily on *listening* skills and practicing *empathy*.

Eventually, I would also like to develop a Flex Day presentation too. The benefits of skillful storytelling are applicable in a variety of settings, from public speaking and job interviews to babysitting and dating. Understanding the secrets of storytelling can be helpful for both faculty and staff alike, and as a member of the campus community, I would be honored to share what I've learned with the other people who work here.

When I walk across campus and see banners of ECC alumni hanging from light poles, I think, “Oh, there’s another story!” Obviously, ECC understands the value of stories and their importance to an institution. Thus, we need to continue to explore how to teach our students how to tell stories well. I plan on continuing down this path as far as it goes because, after my educational and rejuvenating sabbatical, I don’t see my story ending any time in the near future.

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