

Sabbatical Leave Report
Stephanie Schwartz, Humanities
Spring 2019

Summary of sabbatical leave project:

My sabbatical project was a program of independent study sponsored by UCLA. Teresa Barnett, Head of the UCLA Center for Oral History Research, worked with me one-on-one to train and mentor me over the course of my project at UCLA in the University Research Library. In addition, I attended her beginning and advanced classes for Oral History and conducted six oral histories.

During my classes and mentoring I was trained to select a meaningful topic with a pre-determined scope that may be made more significant to future readers or listeners by the time period, geographical area, religious or cultural factors, gender influences, or the proximity or influence of important historical events that may provide a unique framing or context for the events to be discussed during the recorded oral history. The variety of topics and the academic and professional backgrounds of the other class participants were fascinating and made for an interesting and illuminating look at where oral histories can be implemented to bring important stories to light.

We studied transcripts of other oral histories done by expert interviewers to learn from their mistakes and their successes in designing the wording of initial questions and follow-up questions. For example, we carefully paid attention to opportunities to follow up on important clues and unexpected information that was ripe for a deeper dive in the moment even though the oral history's discussion deviated from the interviewer's original plan for the interview. We learned that oral history is part art and part science. So we carefully research the subject

beforehand if possible and gain some preliminary background information. But then in the moment we have to be ready to go where the interview takes us and let go of trying to control or curtail the stories and the meanings that are revealed. At the same time, we have to carefully navigate sensitive issues and read the subject's emotional state and willingness to go deeper into a memory, an emotion, or a topic and push when necessary but also be attuned to their limits and not make them feel pressured or uncomfortable. It is a very delicate dance.

We discussed how to create a detailed preliminary outline of the interview in advance and then memorize it so we are not looking at notes while the actual interview takes place. Instead, we need to concentrate on building rapport with the subject of our interview and stay present with them in the moment so we can ask those important follow-up questions and really pay attention while keeping our overall outline in mind. It's a difficult skill to master. (These tips and techniques are particularly important for the students here at ECC who will be using this process to gain access to a mentor and conduct an oral history to learn about that mentor's journey to success and the most important steps, decisions, and attitudes that contributed to achieving their goals.)

We learned about managing the potential stultifying effect or interference of other friends or family members who may be present in the room or in the house during an oral history recording session and how they may influence the interviewee's willingness to discuss certain topics. So it is much better to negotiate a private place for the interviews to occur without interruption or interference.

Additionally, we learned about technical considerations including recording technology and microphones, sound quality, and transcribing. Furthermore, our classes covered legal aspects and issues involved in recording and the need to provide a release form so the recordings and

transcriptions can be used or made available to be read or held in a collection that may be available to the public or for certain types of researchers. Teresa suggested that we ask our librarians if they would be willing to house an oral history collection here at El Camino College. This would be viable if any other teachers want to assign an oral history project too so we could generate a body of recorded histories and transcripts that may become a useful resource documenting the history of our local region of Los Angeles and the diverse communities that live here in the South Bay.

How the sabbatical benefitted the faculty member and students:

The purpose of this project has been to develop a special classroom project to share with my students and other English teachers to introduce a meaningful and unique way for students to generate original research and learn about a mentor's inspiring journey that allowed them to create a successful life. This project directly relates to our students' need to conduct research at the college level for their research paper requirement in English 1A which most incoming students are now taking during their very first semester in college. Having a unit that directly connects them with the opportunity to identify and interview a personally chosen mentor on the topic of success is a big step forward in learning to reach out to people who can help them achieve their personal and career goals. Being required to connect with a mentor for an important class project also gives a much-needed push to some students who want to speak with mentors but don't know how to approach the conversation and make the connection. The assignment makes it necessary and therefore less scary for them because they have a built-in reason to reach out.

How the sabbatical increased the faculty member's proficiency:

This project increased my proficiency and benefited me, my fellow faculty members, and my students by helping me build my toolkit as a teacher and training me to teach them how to plan and carry out an oral history research project that allows them to connect meaningfully with a mentor who can become a success role model. One of our big focuses in the Humanities is cultivating a growth mindset in all of our students and helping them gain the metacognitive skills they need to stay motivated and focused as they pursue their degrees and prepare for satisfying adult lives and careers after they graduate or transfer from ECC. This is a tall order, especially since we have reorganized our course offerings due to AB 705.

Students are placed into more challenging English courses now in their freshman year, and they need all the guidance and support they can get to master their college-level writing and research skills more quickly. This sabbatical project allows me to provide more guidance in achieving that goal and helps my students stay motivated with real world projects that provide them with meaningful ways to connect with mentors and generate positive attitudes and activate powerful social networks to help them explore their future options and goals. This statewide course reorganization ties in with the spirit of our new equity initiatives and Guided Pathways which are designed to help students choose a major within a family of related majors and career outcomes with similar course requirements so they can easily and seamlessly take the appropriate classes that lead to transfer, graduation, and a meaningful career. The purpose of this sabbatical aligns with the statewide and campuswide realignment of how we help our students get on track and stay on track while empowering them to be successful at school and in their broader lives and careers through extra support, mentoring, and streamlined requirements that allow them to reach the finish line more efficiently.

A few other teachers have expressed interest in using this oral history project activity in their own classes, so this semester we will be using it with a few classes and learning how to make it more accessible and useful to students. I will also post it in our Humanities Teachers' Lounge for anyone who wants to try it, and I already gave a talk on the project to the Humanities Division on Flex Day, so at least one hundred people on campus are aware of it. All in all, this was a very successful and enriching experience to have the opportunity to study at UCLA and learn how to teach the art of generating and conducting professional oral histories to our students and my fellow faculty members. Thank you to Vice President Shankweiler and the sabbatical committee for awarding me this sabbatical and making this project possible.