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Sabbatical Report
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My sabbatical during the Winter 2012 semester was a wonderful experience. In my proposal, I set three goals for my time. I’m happy to report that I accomplished all three. All of the goals were partly motivated by a letter I read in one of my student’s end-of-term portfolio. She said:

“I came into this English class very discouraged; in previous English classes I had struggled with multiple elements of the writing process. I struggled with the motivation to write, what to write about, and grammar most of all. Throughout all of my English classes I never seemed to be able to resolve these issues; some classes even made them worse. After meeting you and experiencing your class for the first time it gave me hope; you were the first teacher I felt like I could relate to. You would talk about general problems you had with writing and some of them were the same as mine” (my emphasis).

Her last sentence articulates something that I hear often from students. Seeing someone else’s struggles with writing, someone else’s process, is important. Sure, textbooks have these models, but there is no substitute for a professor’s first-hand accounts of experiences in the field. So, my sabbatical was largely based off of this premise: to write!

1. Finish a Master of Fine Arts in Poetry from Queens University of Charlotte (which included delivering a thesis reading in Charlotte; teaching a seminar at Queens for current MFA students and faculty; and completing a master’s thesis paper about the craft of writing).

This was the first goal I accomplished. I graduated on January 14th in Charlotte, NC, and I would not have been able to do so without my sabbatical time; my teaching schedule and college responsibilities would not have permitted me to be in Charlotte for 8 days at the beginning of a new semester.

The seminar I taught came out of my academic paper entitled “After Delivery: Fracturing a Female Speaker’s Psychology.” In it, I addressed the impact motherhood has on a poet and the speakers in her poems. Tillie Olsen calls motherhood “the least understood, the most tormentingly complex experience to wrest to truth. […] Men owned us. Babies inhabited our bodies year after year” (254). I examined women poets who write about motherhood, focusing on shifts in perspective from “I” to “you” to “her” to “we.” Certainly, the “I” to “we” move has been accomplished before, especially by male poets such as Walt Whitman. However, the seminar centered on contemporary women poets who perform the same move for different reasons. I wanted those in the seminar to ask what tolerance do we have for the ambiguous, splintered speaker? (This paper is attached to my report).

My seminar went well, and due to the reaction to the topic and my paper, I’ve submitted it to American Poetry Review.
Additionally, I gave a public reading to over 200 people in Charlotte; I read several poems from my master’s thesis, as well as some new poems. This was the piece that I was most nervous about, but once I started reading it was actually really fun. I was surprised at how much people laughed at some of the humor in the poems I read. It set me at ease right away. (I’ve included a few of the poems I read that evening at the end of my report).

The experiences in Charlotte during my graduation week have made me more familiar with the requirements I place on students. What I mean by that is I put myself through the deadlines and anxiety of completing a major paper, endured the frustrations and the excitement of research, the trepidation of sharing my work—often quite personal—with my classmates and colleagues and complete strangers present at my reading. Since I teach composition, the curriculum asks students to write about themselves, and then branch out to do research and to become familiar with research writing in the academy. As I return to the classroom, I will certainly speak about my own recent experiences with these components of our composition curriculum.

2. Write non-fiction essays, especially the kinds of writing I require of my students.

I started this off early with the intense work on my academic essay for Queens. The essay (“After Delivery”) combines personal narrative with significant research, much like some of the essays I assign in EN 101 and 102. Specifically, I examine my experiences in the 4 years of workshops at Queens, and some of the critiques aimed at the speakers of my poems. I used research to discover how other poets changed in their writing after having children.

I’m able to speak to the process of composing the essay, and have drafts to illustrate my work (sometimes great, sometimes little) after each revision. I worked on the essay with the guidance of an advisor at Queens; it was good (and yet a little strange!) to be the student emailing the professor about my essay, asking his thoughts about specific sections, waiting anxiously while he read and responded.

While I will definitely discuss my process for this essay - and refer to my experiences in brainstorming, being overwhelmed by research, and finally plunging in – with my composition students, I see this essay being most useful with my Women’s Lit and Poetry students. It is a more advance piece of writing, and I can see how sharing pieces of the process with them, and some of the drafts I struggled with, will help to articulate the kind of academic paper that I want them to aim for.

Later in the semester of my sabbatical, I focused my writing on two newer assignments that I give to my composition students. One assignment is for EN 101 students, and it requires them to place someone else “side by side” for a similar-but-different comparison. In the past few semesters, when I evaluated these essays, several things were going right; students use good detail and description, chose interesting people to write about, and were able to grasp work on mechanics. However, one of the most important aspects of the assignment was for students to find a focus for their comparison; I wanted them to be able to narrow the comparison to something specific, so they could develop a paper that was less like a timeline and more like a sophisticated analysis of a relationship. Since this focus piece was difficult for them to grasp, despite my teaching about it, I decided I would try to write this assignment from square one, so I could use my own freewriting, brainstorming, and drafting as examples in the elusive quest for a focus.
I learned a lot. I’ve attached my five drafts of this assignment to the end of my report, so you can see how my process evolved and how my focus became clearer and clearer. Since I’m teaching EN 101 online during the first summer session, I’ll use these drafts with students when they are working on the same assignment. I hope that the notes and margin comments, highlights and various colors of text will help my online students to see how I interacted with the piece, and tried to come to it with fresh eyes each time I returned to work on it. It’s a good visual aid for them while I challenge them to do exploratory writing to find a focus; after all, I want them writing about their third or fourth idea usually, not the first thing that enters their mind.

In my EN 102 classes, the only essay I have not written myself is a newer assignment that I recently borrowed from my colleague Nora Neill; after some minor changes, I’ve used it for the past two semesters. It requires students to write a Rogerian Argument paper, addressed to a specific individual, and using at least one scholarly source. This assignment is just wonderful, and I love teaching it. But I’ve been surprised at how students struggle with some of the pieces, especially with deciphering someone to write to (about a problem). So, I chose this assignment to write with the hopes of being able to relay my process to them.

Since my 102 students have a semester of composition under their belts, I knew I didn’t want to fully finish the piece. I knew that I wanted to work on it with them during the semester, while they were working on their own pieces. It will make the discussion of my own research pursuits and my revisions more genuine. I have found that 102 students don’t enter my classes with good research skills or with the tools to revise their own work.

It was ironic that the part I struggled with the most in writing this essay was figuring out who I wanted to write to, and what problem I wanted to discuss! Just like my students! Once I finally settled on my neighbor, the piece came together easily. However, my first draft was much more traditional in argument style than it was Rogerian. I thought about stopping my draft at this point, so that I could write the next version with students. Instead, I spent several other sessions trying to align my ideas with the strict structure of the Rogerian argument style. This process will be most helpful in the fall when I teach EN 102 again; we spend significant class time discussing how our language becomes antagonistic during arguments, and how important it is to monitor our language use so as not to alienate our audience. Using my drafts, I can certainly speak to this process, and the intentionality and discipline it took to revise my language to my neighbor.

I decided to add research to this draft while my students work on their own Rogerian arguments; that way I can show them my own timeline I give myself for finding, evaluating and reading through research.

I am excited about these new documents that I will bring to my future students. I know that I increase my credibility when I can speak to their struggles with writing as my own. I also know that I can be more specific with my guidance to them when I have familiarity with the assignment myself.

3. Develop a process to get some of my work published (including researching publications, understanding rules of submission, and keeping a log).
I started working on this goal as soon as I returned from my graduation in Charlotte. I interviewed some of the writers I know about how they think of publication, how often they submit their work, how they organize their submissions, and many other facets of this process. Many of them gave me documents that they use, e.g. cover letters, spreadsheets, binders with specific sections.

I think I was most anxious about this part of my sabbatical, because the publication world seems rather overwhelming and fickle. Every publication has their own submission guidelines; some only accept online submissions through email, others through a submission manager. Some publications want snail mail copies, and prohibit simultaneous submissions, while others accept submissions year-round. Each time I sat down to do more research, I found myself angry at how inconsistent and difficult it was for me to get a handle on a process.

Therefore, having some thorough examples from colleagues and friends who have been published gave me the boost I needed to keep going. As I accumulated information and documents, I started a file so that I can share this process (and the various processes of others) with creative writing students and other students who wish to try to publish their work.

One of the most helpful surprises in this process was signing up for Twitter. I don’t tweet much, but I do follow writers and publishers so that I can be informed of announcements and calls for publication. In fact, I learned of several writing contests and helpful articles through Twitter that the more experienced writers I interviewed were not familiar with. It’s been pretty neat to have calls for publication delivered right to my smartphone.

I’ve attached to this report my log of pieces that I’ve sent out. They include several individual poems, one academic essay, one chapbook of poetry, and one book-length manuscript of poetry. I have received some lovely and encouraging rejection letters from editors, and also a few form rejection letters. I have a piece forthcoming in Drafthorse, a literary journal of work and no work. I am still awaiting word from other publications about the fate of my pieces.

Now that I have a clear process for submitting my work, and a taste of publishing some of it, I am committed to continue sending my work out. It is an ongoing process, and there is not much better antidote to rejection than sending those pieces somewhere else, where they may just be accepted and welcomed.