The Academic Sabbatical
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Published by University of Ottawa Press


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An important time in the calendar at many universities or colleges is that of reading break, which happens halfway through an academic term. The mid-term week of non-scheduled classes constitutes breathing space for students and instructors alike. However, some do not seem to be sure of the purpose of the break, and year after year people continue to ask (sometimes in humorous ways) if the break is from reading (assuming that everyone has spent much time reading theses, papers, and assigned course materials) or if the break is for reading (supposing that few have engaged in reading to then). Either way, the break is a welcomed time to recharge and look forward to the end of the term.

Another important time within the calendar (in terms of career) is that of the academic leave, known as a sabbatical due to the biblical reference, which states the need for the land to have a year’s rest after the sixth year of productivity. At the arrival of the seventh year, “fallow land is plowed, tilled, the weeds kept down, but no crops raised” (Eells & Hollis, 1962, p. 5). Different researchers offer different accounts of how academic leaves were established in the US, and where they began. According to Lewis B. Cooper (1932), Harvard was the first institution to create a statement of a sabbatical plan, in the nineteenth century, followed by Wellesley, Brown, Columbia, and Cornell. Crosby (1962) reports that the idea of academic leave dates back to 1907, when a Trustees of Columbia University report noted
that “[t]he practice now prevalent in Colleges and Universities of this country of granting periodical leaves of absence to their professors was established not in the interests of the professors themselves but for the good of university education” (cited in Crosby, 1962, p. 253). The sabbatical time was seen as a reprieve from other duties related to teaching and scholarship, as well as an intellectual and practical necessity.

Contrary to popular belief outside of academia, a sabbatical is not a vacation or a time to relax. In fact, over time, the idea of what a sabbatical is has changed, and each person uses the available time in different and unique ways: Some individuals travel to engage in cross-cultural research, others dedicate the time to pull together years of research and turn it into a book, others might explore new pedagogical approaches, and some may decide to engage in activities that might enhance and/or support skill development such as learning to use new platforms or technologies for teaching and learning.

While it is true that the idea of not having to tend to one’s regular academic responsibilities is appealing, it is also true that some of those responsibilities remain, such as continued support for one’s graduate students, unless one requests a colleague to do such work. This can be advantageous for the person on leave, but it might create instability for the students as they have to work with a new person, an “acting” supervisor, for the duration of the leave—whether six or twelve months. When applying for a sabbatical, one needs to remain mindful of the privileges and responsibilities this leave grants. In this chapter, I will share some of the experiences I had while on academic leave, as well as some of what I learned while being away from the office—not away from the work.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

As a person who started her teaching career at age seventeen, my life has been devoted to service and supporting learning whenever I can. Aside from my job within a university, I also work as a consultant and as facilitator of professional-development opportunities for educators. This passion for everything that spells teaching and learning kept me busy during my academic leave. Yes, I engaged in research as was expected. Yes, I enjoyed having time for physical activity. Yes, I enjoyed reading novels and works of fiction that had less to do with being a teacher (or so I thought). I soon realized they
had everything to do with being an educator. Perhaps, out of all the activities in which I engaged, establishing a book club in my local library to introduce patrons to the works of Indigenous writers, poets, and novelists was the highlight of my sabbatical year. Conversing about social issues, history, humour, tradition, values, and other Indigenous perspectives allowed me to remain current in regard to publications, authors, and present events. Most importantly, however, was the opportunity to share some of what has been shared with me and entrusted to me by way of relationships with the Elders in the communities where I am fortunate to collaborate, and by way of the students and other community members who have taught me and reminded me of my responsibility to witness and share. This was one important way in which I was heeding the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Canada, 2015), as an educator, as a community member, and as a parent. The interest that the report garnered was such that what started as a small gathering of interested people soon turned to be a gathering of people concerned with creating their own path toward reconciliation and contributing to creating a shared future. Stories, poems, and fiction were the doors through which we learned some of the true histories of this country; histories that had remained untold until now. In sharing these stories, and in doing this work wholeheartedly and with responsibility, I was sharing the belief of the Haudenosaunee and other First Nations that say that the work that one does has an impact on the next seven generations.

The timing for doing all this could not have been better. The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was published in June of 2015, and the need for heeding the calls to action of the report was not only required, it was indispensable. This translated into the need to develop curriculum, facilitate workshops, and create resources and materials that would support teachers, public servants, and citizens in every walk of life. Requests poured in from institutions, organizations, and individuals wanting to advance their knowledge in regard to Indigenous people and culture, and thus begin to fulfill their responsibility as citizens of this place. While I was supporting all these organizations and colleagues, I realized my 365 days of leave were almost gone, my calendar was running out of pages. But I also realized that I was starting to paint a clearer portrait of myself as an Indigenous scholar.
Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained

In putting pen to paper or rather fingers to keyboard, I was able to see my “productivity” and what I had accomplished in 12 months. To some, this variety of activities might seem scattered and not focused on an area of expertise (as is the expectation in academia). However, the picture I painted of myself as a scholar, as a researcher, as a community member (beyond the university), and as an educator, fulfilled my own expectations. As a former international student, as an immigrant to Canada, and as a grateful inhabitant on the lands of the Wsáneć Nation, and the Lekwungen- and SenĆoten-speaking people, I feel a continued responsibility to give back to the communities that have offered me so much, and that have welcomed me with open arms and open hearts. In doing all this work, I might have disrupted the more conventional notion of needing to formally engage in research while on academic leave. However, I could not help asking myself, What is research, anyway? Opaskwayak scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) says that Indigenous research is the ceremony of maintaining accountability to the relationships one establishes with community to support and advance Indigenous ways of knowing and being. I was content and at peace in having become accountable to my relations, and to have advanced some of my knowledge about Indigenous ontologies and ways of living in the world.

While the original idea of having a year to “rest” might have been the thought behind the principles originally established at Harvard in the 1880s, Boening’s research (1996) showed that faculty “take advantage of sabbatical leaves not only to further explore their subject matter in their own discipline, but to learn how to be better teachers as well” (p. 9). Further, Miller and Kang (1998) reported from their research that upon return from academic leave, faculty felt “intellectually renewed in knowledge in their fields of study, teaching methods, and viewed themselves as better teachers who were eager to work with their students” (p. 10). I know I share those feelings.

I realize now that the number seven (as in sabbath or sabbatical) was forever present in much of what I did: I acted as consultant for seven different companies or institutions locally and nationally. I delivered seven keynote presentations, and facilitated seven workshops for international cohorts from China, Japan, Mexico, and Panama. I offered workshops for in-service teachers at seven different locations in British Columbia. I worked on seven book chapters
(and co-edited a book), and I developed curriculum in collaboration with seven different local organizations, including the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

After my leave, I was excited to go back to my office, to meet with students, to converse with colleagues, to start some meetings looking out the window, witnessing the wisdom and rhythm of nature as the leaves on the maple tree changed at autumn. Leaves continue to change, and the Earth follows its rhythms. I am reflecting on past moments at the time of a pandemic when life at the university takes on a different rhythm and pace. I am three years away from my next academic leave but I am taking this change of pace as graciously as I can, being grateful for having the opportunity to take this time within the original posit of a sabbatical, which was a time to rest. This is my quasi-sabbatical time to rejuvenate, to grow in personal and professional ways, and most importantly, to unlearn and relearn.

Endnote

1 For further reference to this foresighted principle, see https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/values/

References


