CHAPTER 3

The Voyage Continues: Navigating Discovery between Two Sabbaticals

Susan Elliott-Johns

Identity and Integrity are not the granite from which fictional heroes are hewn. They are subtle dimensions of the complex, demanding, and life-long process of self-discovery.

Palmer (1998)

The timely opportunity to write a chapter revisiting lived experience during my first twelve-month sabbatical (July 1, 2013–June 30, 2014) comes when I am looking forward to a second, and probably final, sabbatical (July 1, 2020–June 30, 2021). Both sabbaticals were awarded by administrative decision and represent key landmarks on my voyage of discovery as a teacher and researcher. A professor of education for the past fifteen years, and before that a teacher, consultant, and school leader, I intend to retire from full-time university teaching in June 2021. This was factored into my written plan when submitted to my dean. After sabbatical I anticipate continuing to supervise graduate students, and to research and write.

This chapter presents reflections on experience of the sabbatical as a voyage of discovery, 2013–2014, and reflexively extends beyond that year to briefly consider where I find myself today—that is, looking ahead to a sabbatical of a very different nature in 2020–2021. Reflection is understood as a way of allowing ourselves to step back
from experiences and assist the development of critical-thinking skills and understanding through close analysis of that experience. That said, “reflection is after and individual whereas reflexivity is ongoing and relational” (Lyle, 2017, p. vii). I also regard reflectivity and reflexivity as moving along a continuum, with reflexivity occurring as a quite mature and somewhat rare form of reflection. I would also contend that by practising reflexivity, “we become responsible and accountable for our choices, our actions, and our contributions to a relational system” (Oliver, 2004, p. 127). Furthermore, Lyle states (2017, p. vii):

By its very design, then, reflexivity disrupts normalized assumptions about how we come to knowledge and presents essential questions about our capacities as artists/researchers/teachers to account for an ever-evolving understanding of our experiences. This understanding resides in a humanizing pedagogy and has as its goal facilitation of re/humanization and appreciation of perspective diversity.

Exploring Professional Identity

Consistent with Palmer’s (1998) conceptualization of identity, I have also come to a recognition of identity as an evolving nexus—all that comprises the mystery of “self” and a constantly moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am—personally as well as professionally. Some of my very earliest insights into who I am were shared with my audience when I was a guest speaker at the Australian Reading Association Conference, in Melbourne, in 1993.

Now, in Infant School, two years before starting Primary School, we did “work” all morning and, after lunch, took a nap in the afternoon on little cots set out all over the classroom. That is, some of us took a nap! An active child, I well recall the strange feeling of lying there, peering around the hushed, darkened room and wondering why? Why did I have to lie there (wide awake) when the very last thing I felt like doing was sleeping? All those books, puzzles and games, friends to talk with and they wanted me to sleep?! Keeping still was not my forte and, I guess, I must have been even more restless than I recall because, very shortly, I was being sent to the Headmistress to read aloud to her. Something I rapidly discovered I’d much rather do than take a nap. (Elliott-Johns, 1993)
While my memories of reading to the headmistress were most likely the result of finding a way to mitigate my disruptive behaviour and enable others to nap, even if I didn't, I was blissfully unaware of that at the time. Suffice to say, mitigating my own overactive behaviour became my responsibility as an adult and, in retrospect, I think it’s probably fair to say I took this inner drive and curiosity into my work as a professional educator—manifested at times to the point of workaholism.

Always a practitioner first, even since moving to work in the academy, I have worked hard to cultivate what I consider to be an authentic practitioner–scholar perspective. That is, while I have a sound record of published scholarly work, I remain passionate about ensuring my research extends beyond academic shelves alone. I prefer that this work influences my own practice and the developing practice of teacher candidates I work with, as well as fellow teacher educators and other practitioners in school settings. A firm believer that teaching cannot be regarded as merely technique, I also concur with Palmer (1998) that the reduction of teaching to intellect alone results in a cold abstraction. Therefore, the intentional dissemination of my research to a wide variety of audiences—through books, journals, and media accessed by other practitioners—also demonstrates my unfailing support for a view that encompasses research informing practice and practice informing research (I have not always encountered appreciation of the connection between the two in academe. On the contrary, I have frequently witnessed a contrived separation of these and the need for further work in this domain).

The significant influences, over time, of inspirational, collegial, and generous relationships on my evolving identity and work as a practitioner–scholar are not lost on me—and, on reflection, these influences can easily be detected woven throughout my experience of sabbatical leave. To date, because of the influence of many significant voices in the immediate field and beyond, I continue to grow and learn, both as an educator and a human being. An explicit priority on clearly relational aspects of my life and work is also evident in terms of their countless contributions to an ability to sustain energy, motivation, and inquiry, thus enhancing and enriching my life’s work as an educator for over forty years.
Conceptualizing Sabbatical

My first sabbatical was approved for 2012–2013. I deferred it for a year as I wanted to teach in my university’s PhD program in the summer of 2013, a decision that resulted in teaching, doctoral supervision, and committee participation throughout the next phase of my career. Deferment was therefore a timely decision that supported alignment of doctoral engagement with the synergy I see between research and practice.

The call for chapters for this book described the purpose of a sabbatical as “giving an employee a chance to step back from their role at work and focus on personal enrichment and professional development.” Working from that understanding, I primarily explore my experience in 2013–2014, which was an opportunity to work without regular teaching responsibilities in the BEd program or service responsibilities to the university. In this way, explorations of the nuances of identity and integrity in my life and work—an ongoing voyage of discovery in and of itself—are shared. I mention this as a novel scenario for someone whose career trajectory developed largely in public-school systems, where I had never considered a leave of this nature as an option. Suffice to say, the opportunity to step back and take a year’s paid leave to conduct research and write, after which I’d return to my tenured academic position, was regarded as a privilege. In retrospect, (a) what did I plan to do? and (b) what were the outcomes of work accomplished?

The original call for this collection caught my attention as having a rare focus (i.e., a brief search of the literature indicates little appears to have been written on this topic), also due to the inclusion of the following gentle reminder from the editors to prospective authors:

We appreciate that sabbaticals often entail some rest, vacation, and frolicking with family. These activities, while wonderful, are not the focus of the book. We encourage you to focus on the academic benefits of the sabbatical. You may also wish to acknowledge the flextime, and the ability to navigate family (particularly if they live far away, you have young children, aging parents, etc.), however, we wish to respect that sabbatical is first and foremost an academic endeavour. While there are many auxiliary benefits, they are not the reason for sabbatical.
The editors’ comments reflected my own experience with some renditions of (what often seemed to me) disproportionate sabbatical time spent on many of those “auxiliary benefits.” In retrospect, and as I review a list of publications connected to my sabbatical, I was laser-focused on the academic benefits inherent in an earned sabbatical. Evidently that was the case as the sabbatical report submitted to the dean in September comprised of four pages and an addendum summarizing ten additional scholarly activities completed during my sabbatical (i.e., not originally listed in my sabbatical plan—one of which was the faculty-facilitator role included in the narrative reflections here).

The twelve months of the sabbatical were indeed spent compiling a productive publication record, presentations at national and international conferences, participation in an international practicum, and program design and course development (including work on a proposed BEd in adult education, one that, unfortunately, was never offered because of internal university politics and a lack of funding). As previously mentioned, the nature of sabbatical leave was quite novel in my career to date, and personal enrichment also translated to the kind of work that was difficult to accommodate when teaching full time at the faculty. While I would not have regular classes that year, I anticipated working on my research and writing. In other words, it was going to be a different kind of busy, and most certainly not a vacation.

Working in collaborative partnerships with like-minded others, I have always embraced opportunities to grow and learn as both an educator and a human being. This was how I envisaged the sabbatical as a voyage of ongoing discovery; the access to focused time to continue work on my evolving identity as an educator and ongoing contributions to the field of knowledge and practice. In this regard, the wisdom of David Booth and Bill Moore (2003) still resonates for me, speaking to the embodiment of who I am today as both teacher and researcher.

As teacher, you come to your classroom carrying a backpack of poems but, in truth, you are the words you read. Your children take in the teacher and the teaching as one – a single, complete event. Your life is your poem: your experiences illuminate your present classroom moments. The children discover your parents, your teachers, your poetry past, revealed in your choice of words, your manner of reading to them, your attitude towards them, your eyes as you read them. You are the poem. (p. 7)
I believe how we teach is intimately connected with our personal histories, knowledge, experience, commitments—the habits and attitudes of our lifetimes. These are nuanced by ongoing professional learning through programs of education, professional-development opportunities, and efforts to integrate key elements of our professionalism with who we are. We teach, and research, according to who we are. If we accept that how we teach depends very much on our own personal history, knowledge, experience and commitments—the habits and attitudes developed over a lifetime—I would argue it follows that how (and why) we conduct and share our research would also contribute to decisions around how (and why) we elect to allocate time during a sabbatical.

What Was Planned for the Sabbatical?

To accomplish great things, we must not only act, but also dream; not only plan, but also believe.

Anatole France

When applying for sabbatical at my university it is customary to provide a sabbatical plan to the dean. I saw this as capturing what I hoped to accomplish during the year if the leave was granted. Equally, the sabbatical report, due following completion of the sabbatical, is supposed to bear some resemblance to the work planned. Essentially, at the heart of my sabbatical plan was the intent to further pursue and develop my research program and writing for scholarly publication that I had successfully established and sustained since arriving at Nipissing University seven years earlier—the focus being on the self-study of teacher-education practices (S-STEP) and literacy-teacher education for contemporary classrooms.

Beyond further development of my research and writing for publication, the sabbatical was to facilitate the expansion of options for future teaching assignments. Furthermore, the leave would enhance my ability to work with my increasing network of national and international partners in teacher-education research and practice; specifically, partnerships forged at recent scholarly conferences and resulting from work as a member of the executive for both the Canadian Association for Teacher Education (CATE) and the International Study Association for Teachers and Teaching (ISATT).
That said, with specific reference to research and teaching, I planned to work on several related goals during the sabbatical year. These included the publication of a co-edited text that was underway (*Perspectives on Transitions in Schooling and Instructional Practice*, 2013) and the completion of a text for which a proposal had just been accepted by a publisher (see Elliott-Johns, 2015). As a result of papers being accepted in 2013, and in order to present findings from my research and writing in process, my plan for sabbatical also included attending and presenting papers at two international conferences and one national conference.

To my mind, the opportunity to research and reconceptualize courses taught, and thus to (potentially) also expand my teaching repertoire in the future, was inherent in a sabbatical leave. For example, the pre-service teacher (BEd) program includes language arts (for junior/intermediate division; i.e., Grades 4–10). I had been responsible for teaching this language-arts course since I joined Nipissing University and felt it would benefit from further revisions, specifically in terms of purpose, content, and anticipated learning outcomes. It had been tweaked and revised for currency numerous times as a 72-hour course, a 60-hour course, and then as a 36-hour course. A focus on key components for contemporary classrooms was essential. Simultaneously, I was assisting with the design and development of a BEd in an adult-education program, specifically researching and presenting detailed course descriptions for stage-two submission to the university’s senate. (Unfortunately, while this innovative program did receive stage-three approval, it was never offered because of internal university politics and lack of funding.)

As previously mentioned, it was my intent to become more involved in teaching and supervising students in the newly minted doctoral program at my university, so I planned a great deal of critical reading in educational theory to support such work on my return from sabbatical.

**Discovery: What Was Accomplished as a Result of the Sabbatical?**

Over and above evidence of my productivity, what is not explicitly conveyed are the more intangible effects of considerable time spent thinking, planning, and writing during that year; for example, the benefit of delicious days available for further contemplation around
Palmer’s (1998) “trifecta” of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual nourishment richly afforded by the sabbatical.

To elaborate, intellectually I invariably immerse myself in projects (whether research, teaching, or service) with energy and enthusiasm, and, as a colleague once wrote to me, tend to exhibit “never-ending positivity and astonishing work ethic” (P. Fisher, personal communication, September 7, 2016). Time here was a luxury and spent, literally, devoring books, articles, and multimedia to contextualize projects planned. Without the need to balance a regular teaching schedule, the novelty and sheer joy of this time to read, write, and think was truly a unique experience—one that I relished, soaking up the experience like a sponge! Books, papers, links to video clips, journal entries, sketches, musical interludes, meaningful quotations, and even satirical cartoons were noted and recorded as catalysts for further reflection—often as inclusions in my personal journal.

Revisiting this time has, in turn, taken me back emotionally to a major life decision, also as part of the sabbatical, to experiment with the scheme of moving to live full time in the lakeside cottage we had then owned for two years and had recently finished renovating. The purchase of this exquisite retreat had been partially driven by an increasingly acute realization that I needed to make more of a concerted effort to spend less time immersed in work-related activities and to unplug from the computer more frequently!

The weekends and holidays we had begun to spend at the cottage, where there was, purposively, no internet connection, signaled a gradual, but very tangible, process of my accepting the need to consciously devote more time to family, friends, and interests beyond my work—actually, to myself. I can attest to this presenting a complex untangling of ways of being when one is sufficiently privileged to have work that is as enjoyable and enriching as I find teaching and learning to be. Very soon after we began spending time at the lake on a regular basis, I also began to take up (or re-take up) nourishment for the soul I had not even missed before but was definitely missing from my workaholic lifestyle. For example, reading favourite genres for pleasure and relaxation (novels, biographies, poetry, even magazines), all of which had been subsumed under mountains of research-related reading and preparation for teaching classes; assisting with interior-decorating choices as the renovations became home improvements; gardening—there is something primal about getting
one’s hands dirty moving piles of earth, spending time digging and planting, seeding, and waiting for the transformation of perennial spaces; the other image etched into my mind from this time are the countless hours just spent watching the water—infinitely calming and rejuvenating for the mind, body, and spirit. Later, five years after selling the property, I still get a lump in my throat when I see pictures of that cottage and its idyllic setting. Those are the times I can still hear the wind rustling the trees, the waves gently lapping on the shore, smell the fragrance of my garden, and experience the shadow move across the deck as the magnificent bald eagle glides overhead and out over the lake, headed toward its nest on the opposite shore. In a scholarly sense, the significance of that place and time is still sometimes difficult to explain. But, as Lyle (2020) also suggests, “I wonder if we struggle because we are conditioned to negate the emotive and the spiritual” (p. 4), and she goes on to say: “Both Parker Palmer (1998) and David Gruenwald (2003) remind me that we are shaped by the particular places we inhabit and how we are shaped is, in large part, contingent upon the quality of attention we give those places and ourselves in relation to them” (Lyle, 2020, p. 10).

Increased recognition of the spiritual as a result of sabbatical cannot be underestimated. To paraphrase Palmer (1998), my guide in many things connected with explorations of self-knowledge and the need to attend to the voice of the teacher within, spiritual here refers to the diverse ways in which we ourselves are in tune with our heart’s longing to truly connect with the largeness of life—beyond ourselves—a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching” (p. 2). At the beginning of the sabbatical, particularly in the serene setting of trees and lake, I became acutely aware that I needed to be paying more attention to listening to the teacher within, my inner teacher, and to be actively seeking solitude, silence, reading, and thinking deeply (meditating on the world of things), communing with nature, and really listening—or “talking to myself.” Palmer reminds us: “We need to find every possible way to listen to that voice and take its counsel seriously, not only for the sake of our work, but for the sake of our health (p. 12). Sabbatical as retreat (literally, considering the cottage location too) enabled me to take a deep breath inward and to work on rebuilding my capacity for connectedness. For example, re-energizing intellect, emotion, and spirit where they converged in my personal and professional self, and making much needed adjustments to what was becoming
routine and fragmented. As an integral part of an ongoing voyage of discovery, sabbatical allowed the time and an activation of my internal compass, to steer my ship back on a spiritually rejuvenating course, and toward fostering more wholeness in praxis. “Integrity requires that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not. . . . By choosing integrity, I become more whole, but wholeness does not mean perfection. It means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am” (Palmer, 1998, p. 6).

For the purposes of this chapter, I have elected to highlight four significant experiences through the lens of sabbatical as a voyage of self-discovery, and to explore each of these in terms of: How did the granting of a sabbatical extend and enhance the work involved in each? What was accomplished? How did the overall experience contribute to my ongoing learning as a practitioner–scholar? The four experiences explored are (1) initiation of an edited book project (subsequently completed and published); (2) presentation of papers at international, national, and provincial conferences; (3) ongoing work as an active member of the broader scholarly community, as a peer reviewer, and membership on various editorial/advisory boards; and (4) the role of faculty facilitator with an international practicum in Italy.

Leadership for Change (2015): An Edited Book
Prior to the year my sabbatical was taken, I was engaged in a number of compelling discussions with colleagues across the country as we examined understandings of components, purposes, and effectiveness of teacher-education programs in Canada in the shifting contexts of teacher-education reform (Falkenberg, 2015). This was also the period just before, in my home province of Ontario, when teacher education evolved to a four-semester program (Elliott-Johns & Richardson, 2017; Kitchen & Petrarca, 2017; Ng-A-Fook et al., 2017). Even then (six years ago, at the time of writing), technological developments, financial constraints, and shifting demographics, along with a range of other factors, were increasingly contributing to climates of acute uncertainty. Bringing about positive change (e.g., by governments, university leaders, and other stakeholders) appeared increasingly complex and challenging. While educational change, including teacher-education change, is, undoubtedly, political, multi-faceted, and uncertain, in my experience it also takes time and skilled leadership. As I continued to read and reflect deeply
on contemporary issues related to teacher education (social, political, and economic), I began to question why we were not hearing the voices of deans of education in the national conversation? And what would we hear from deans of education invited to share their perspectives on leadership for change in contemporary teacher education? The result was the hatching of my project that led to the publication of Leadership for Change in Teacher Education: Voices of Canadian Deans of Education (Elliott-Johns, 2015), the central purpose of the book being to compile a collection of brief, engaging, provocative essays to disseminate ideas and perspectives on leadership for change in contemporary teacher education from deans of education across Canada.

The project was launched in February of the sabbatical with the acceptance of the book proposal by Sense Publishers (now Brill), after which I contacted more than seventeen deans of education in faculties of education across Canada, with fourteen agreeing to participate. Contributors were made up of relatively new as well as more experienced deans. The project was formulated by requesting participants share reflections on guiding questions related to five broad themes of interest and, more specifically, in relation to their own situated leadership for contemporary teacher education. Five guiding questions were offered for consideration:

- What critical issues, research, and current ways of thinking about teaching, learning and pedagogy for teacher education inform your leadership of a faculty of education?
- What are the most important external/internal conditions and inherent tensions encountered in your work?
- What insights can you share about the ways contemporary thinking about teacher education and change are reflected in pre-service programs at your current location?
- What important changes, transitions, or transformations are you experiencing in leadership for teacher education?
- What is your vision for teacher education, going forward?

The result was an illuminating collage of voices on a topic that continues to have a limited profile in the literature. In the foreword, Claire Kosnik (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto), summarized the project this way:
Leadership is demanding anyway but is made ever more so in our increasingly politicized context. The criticisms of teacher education programs abound and it is often the Deans who are the “face” of the institution. They are required to respond to seemingly never-ending demands. Ironically, Deans of Education as individuals are often overlooked in the rush to improve education, implement mandates, shore up sagging finances, attend to the concerns of stakeholders, and on and on. Susan Elliott-Johns recognized this void in the literature which led to her compiling and editing *Leadership for Change in Teacher Education: Voices of Canadian Deans of Education*. This is a laudable goal which she fulfilled admirably by presenting a unique text that provides insider’s stories of the work of Deans of Education. This collection of essays highlights the work of 14 highly committed individuals all of whom are working in demanding situations. Giving them a voice deepens our understanding of the complexity of leading a school of education and adds another piece of the “puzzle” of teacher education. (Kosnik, 2015)

In addition to the insights and positive feedback in Dr. Kosnik’s foreword, I think recognition of the significance of the work was best captured in the review below from Professor Fern Snart, then dean of education at the University of Alberta. Her words resonated deeply for me as having achieved the goals of the project, thus making all the work involved in inviting, editing, and compiling the resulting collection of work from leaders of teacher education across the country more than worthwhile.

*Leadership for Change* was a catalyst to immersing myself in this book, promising as it does the “Voices of Canadian Deans of Education.” A member of the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE) for over a decade, I have been honoured to join these voices around many conference tables and other informal sessions. The promise of important insights these voices can share is fulfilled within every one of the compelling chapters. The book reminds us of the diverse geographical, political, and theoretical contexts that enhance understandings of multiple perspectives on leadership and the complex educational challenges inherent in contemporary teacher education. A deep commitment to public education and a profound work ethic towards
stellar, relevant teacher education resonates across the work of these deans of education. This thought-provoking book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on reconceptualising leadership for teacher education.

How did the granting of a sabbatical extend and enhance this work? First and foremost, the extensive time involved in communicating with contributors was made available, which supported my work on reading and responding with suggested edits and revisions as the authors worked with me on their contributions. (I must say, it often felt like an exercise in skill, diplomacy, and courage, acting as editor for these well-known deans from faculties across Canada.) Accolades for the work from the Association of Canadian Deans of Education, which launched the book with a reception following an invited symposium at a Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE) conference, were another significant outcome of the project, and their recognition for this academic achievement truly made the sabbatical feel like a gift that kept on giving.

The book was a labour of love on a combination of topics I remain passionate about, leadership for teacher education, and is still one of the publications of which I am most proud. However, and I stress again, it is highly unlikely the book would have been completed without the deep contemplation afforded by the sabbatical focal time, which led to the recognition of the need for this work.

**Publication of Papers Presented at International, National, and Provincial Conferences**

While selected as a significant experience, I acknowledge that attending and presenting papers as part of a sabbatical is a common occurrence. I highlight what was accomplished here because, in turn, these conference presentations led directly to considerable productivity during this period. The single and collaborative presentations made at five international conferences, two national conferences, and a provincial conference contributed to the publication of seven refereed and four professional publications during the sabbatical year. Furthermore, as a scholarly member of the self-study community, I both initiated and guest co-edited a special issue of the *Studying Teacher Education* journal (vol. 9, no. 2). The special issue had a guest
editorial and nine research articles on the theme of exploring the transformative nature of self-study of teacher-education practices.

The granting of a sabbatical clearly extended and enhanced this work simply by making the necessary time available, not only to initiate but to also complete a great deal of writing—as well as coordinating publication of the work of others (Elliott-Johs & Tidwell, 2013). A recurring challenge for me when teaching full-time has always been redirecting focus and energies to finishing pieces of writing. While it is always good advice to have various pieces at different stages of completion, I often found it difficult to be in serious writing mode while also in serious teaching mode. The lack of distraction/multi-tasking during sabbatical was therefore extremely beneficial to me, personally and professionally—facilitating both collaborative writing and subsequent publication because of conference participation, for example. Over the course of my sabbatical, my motivation remained high and additional articles submitted for publication were under review as my sabbatical was completed, and were subsequently accepted for publication.

**Ongoing Contributions to the Scholarly Community**

**(Peer Review/Editing)**

Since becoming a member of my current faculty in 2006, I have found contributing to peer-review processes and assisting with the work of other scholars both informative and helpful in the development of my own writing. A long-term member of three international review boards, **LEARNing Landscapes** ([https://www.learninglandscapes.ca](https://www.learninglandscapes.ca)), **Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy** (International Reading Association), and **Voices from the Middle** (National Council of Teachers of English), I was also a regular reviewer of conference proposals for several professional associations (including American Educational Research Association (AERA), Canadian Society for Studies in Education (CSSE), and related special interest groups Canadian Association for Teacher Education (CATE), and Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP)). As with all commitments we make in our work, the nature of these activities could also usurp a great deal of time, but I believe anything worth doing is worth doing well.

In short, therefore, the granting of a sabbatical contributed to my abilities to not only continue with this learning work but afforded time to extend and enhance interactions with the scholarly
community in a couple of other ways too. For example, in March of the sabbatical year I was appointed an associate editor with the journal *Teachers and Teaching Theory and Practice* (ISATT) and formally joined the international advisory board of *Studying Teacher Education*. Prior to and beyond the sabbatical, the networks forged because of these activities have been a continuous source of scholarly learning, research partnerships, inspiration, and collegial support, here in Canada and around the world. Essentially, I consider my engagement with the scholarly community goes beyond service. Rather, my commitment to service as professional learning moves it firmly into the intersection of research and service.

**Faculty Facilitator, International Practicum**

A direct result of the sabbatical, a decision was taken to travel to Italy in May of the sabbatical year and spend three weeks in Sulmona as a faculty facilitator, accompanying a group of thirty-eight teacher candidates (all fifth-year concurrent-education students close to graduating from both their undergraduate and BEd programs at Nipissing University). The other two faculty facilitators with the international practicum were colleagues, but I did not know any of the teacher candidates before leaving as they attended classes at Nipissing’s Brantford Campus. I had previously declined such invitations because the international practicums on my campus were generally scheduled February–March, and since I routinely did not teach during the winter semesters, it was closely guarded as precious research/writing time. The granting of a sabbatical made it possible for me to give serious consideration to this venture, and three weeks in Italy in May, without jeopardizing my time for writing for publication (after all, I had a whole year!). It also presented an exciting opportunity to travel, support, and work with a dynamic group of young people who were poised on the brink of setting out on a short-term adventure of their own—international teaching—just before making longer-term life decisions about their respective futures as teachers. Suffice to say, I was in.

As a unique component of the sabbatical experience, the trip to Italy contributed to enriching and enhancing both my personal and professional experience from the outset. We flew from Toronto to Venice, which was in itself an interesting experience, as many of the twenty-something-year-olds we were accompanying had not
travelled outside of the country before, and certainly had not taken an eight-hour transatlantic flight. (The departure scene at the airport reminded me of so many school trips taken, with doting parents waving goodbye to their Grade 8 sons and daughters as we left for two- or three-day trips to Ottawa or Québec City. The parents of these young adults were just as anxious—and there were a few tears shed among the joyful smiles and last-minute hugs and advice.) Once on the “other side,” navigating through the terminal to security and beyond, we became teachers again as our knowledge and experience reassured and assisted our travelling companions, who had questions even before we were sitting on the plane. This, however, also enabled the immediate forging of trust and rapport as I began to build relationships with all these young people with whom I’d be spending the next three weeks. Informally, confidence was boosted when individuals’ anxieties were quietly assuaged by activating “assumed” knowledge and experience in the situation. I found myself noting how easily we are able to slip into the relational as teachers in new surroundings—a learning experience in itself—but one we’re not always aware of unless we step out of our familiar routines. A teaching context in Italy drew out my inner teacher every bit as much as a teaching context in Ontario and past experiences teaching in the United Kingdom and, within Canada, in Quebec, Nunavut, and Prince Edward Island. But that’s a whole other story!

It was also a bonus to be a member of the faculty team of three colleagues I knew well and with whom I had been looking forward to spending this time. Most probably as a result of my own considerable experience as a world traveller, as well as being a well-seasoned member of the teaching profession, I rapidly felt much at ease with the whole group and, subsequently, sat back to enjoy the flight to Venice.

Before the drive to Sulmona, two days after arriving in Italy, we spent a day touring Venice and soaking up the sights and sounds of Venetian culture in the sunshine. Many gondola trips were taken that day by excited teacher candidates. As we shopped, my colleagues and I would catch glimpses of them disappearing under bridges and out the other side again, grinning up at us like Cheshire cats. It must be said, the professional calibre and personality bandwidth of the teacher candidates on the trip were immediately evident to me, and this is also something I know made the experience incredibly rich and enjoyable. We were sharing time with young adults whose goals
were twofold: to engage fully in a valuable professional learning experience—and to enjoy everything else the opportunity offered. (While I have heard this is not always the case for everyone who accompanies these international practicum excursions, my colleagues and I certainly lucked in with this group.) In turn, this positionality made a huge difference to how we, as faculty, were able to relate authentically to the group as a whole and to work effectively with individuals—in essence, as colleagues.

Our three weeks spent in Sulmona, a beautiful little city in the province of L’Aquila, Abruzzo region, steeped in medieval history, found us 163 kilometres directly east of Rome—and the aqueducts, squares, awe-inspiring architecture, and ancient cobblestone streets were indeed a daily reminder we were visitors to another time and place. Immersion in the Italian language and culture were, of course, also central to the experience (even while the language of the practicum was English). Living and working somewhere, albeit briefly, rather than being there entirely as a tourist is a rather special way to experience different places, people, institutions, and lifestyles. Technically, my role was to be a practicum advisor to students who would be teaching English and other subjects (in English) in Italy. Working in pairs, teaching teams, teacher candidates were assigned to classes in a range of elementary and high schools throughout the small town of Sulmona. The time in Sulmona included visiting classrooms to consult daily, more frequently if necessary, and toward the end of the placement I would observe a specific lesson, at a mutually agreed upon time, and provide a formal report on their teaching.

My time in Italy, facilitated by the sabbatical, encompasses so many rich and enduring recollections that go beyond the scope of this chapter. But the one vivid memory of Sulmona is the sheer novelty of being able to walk to all the schools in town where the teacher candidates were teaching. This made it possible to drink in and really absorb the sights and sounds of our location, so much more so than hopping into a vehicle and driving everywhere. It also required planning ahead in order to arrive places on time and not in a state of disarray; most days were very hot and sunny, 27–30 degrees Celsius. No complaints, though! I vividly recall the delights of sampling the parks en route to supervision, of peering in shop windows and planning to return in the evening (post-siesta, when stores opened again); climbing the stiff gradients of narrow cobble streets with ancient buildings on each side, and everywhere I walked
in town enjoying a panoramic view of the magnificent mountains surrounding Sulmona. Those magnificent, brooding mountains, still snow-capped in May, remain etched on my heart as a reminder of that place in time, and the need for humility. Compared to those mountain ranges, we play only a very small part in the scheme of things, but I’m also reminded of Baldwin et al. (2013), that “place matters because it encourages new ways of questioning and being in the world” (p. 2).

I can clearly identify those daily walks in bright sunshine as a significant aspect of personal/professional growth for me as, while a part of my responsibilities there, walking offered the time to step back, reflect, and SLOW DOWN—to meditate with even more critical consciousness than usual. Being removed from the familiar—even my responsibilities were different too—contributed to a greater sense of the growth and, as I now see, signalling my deepening interest in reflexivity and the beginnings of a subtle shift away from reflection alone.

In summary, I share the following reflections on how the sabbatical extended and enhanced this work in terms of the most rewarding and most challenging aspects of the learning experience undertaken in Italy. The opportunity to travel abroad with a fascinating group of young people, and to share their experience, was incredibly rewarding. In addition to the time spent living and working in Sulmona with the teacher candidates, associate teachers, and other educators. We also experienced the culture by travelling to L’Aquila, the archaeological site at Pompeii, the Amalfi Coast (Sorrento), Florence, and Rome. Seeing stunning vistas visited through their eyes was enormously rewarding, as well as further satisfying my own thirst for seeing and doing as learning, thus embellishing the landscape of my own career as a professional learner.

Interestingly, one evening several the teacher candidates shared how they really enjoyed spending time with the three of us and found our indirect modelling of enthusiasm for ongoing personal and professional growth inspirational. They acknowledged that we were not at all jaded by being in the later stages of our careers. (By which I think they were too polite to say, “so old.”) Nevertheless, I guess we were seen as being authentic in truly “teaching who we are,” and, to me, that was a huge reward in and of itself.

The most challenging aspect of this adventure was my acute awareness of language as barrier while in Italy. I had a very limited,
and quickly learned, Italian vocabulary, but I sometimes found it frustrating because there was so much rich dialogue I would have loved to engage in—about history, customs, experiences, the educational system, politics, cuisine—and I could not. So many of the Italians we worked with had good English (which helped), and we also had a fluent, Italian-speaking colleague with us, but it’s not the same thing as fluently engaging in conversations oneself. Next time I visit, I hope to have acquired at least a working knowledge of Italian.

The Reflexive Turn: Looking Back, Moving Forward

*Why do you go away? So that you can come back. So that you can see the place where you came from with new eyes and extra colours. And the people there you see differently too. Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving.*

Terry Pratchett (2012, p. 332)

Flexible schedules and more autonomy have allowed me to organize my life and work at the faculty, compared with my former life and work in a busy school, where I worked to resolve minute-to-minute crises generated by students, teachers, and other school-community members. However, flexible schedules and increased autonomy also facilitate crossing too many boundaries between personal and professional space, and the struggle to keep a work-life balance becomes a significant challenge. This has been my experience; I hold no one but myself responsible. A critical downside of loving one’s work is that it can stealthily burrow itself into the very fabric of daily life, almost to the point of being unrecognizable as “work.” The need to be cognizant and selective of personal and professional boundary crossings is vital if one is to nourish the soul through critical consciousness and a balanced approach to intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth. This self-work continues.

*Non Satis Scire* (To Know Is Not Enough), is a touchstone I consider integral to the fostering of wholeness in praxis. My interpretation of the phrase regards knowledge as an organic process subject to continual revision and growth. More specifically, for me, it evokes positionality: how we move through the world with our knowledge, understanding, passion, and empathy; how we work to make a difference in the lives of others; and how we continue to learn
(about) ourselves. I also firmly believe that “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 2018, p. 2). As I hope these reflections on my sabbatical experiences and continual voyage of personal and professional discovery serve to demonstrate, the granting of sabbatical only extended and enhanced these deeply held convictions and my ability to live them as fundamental to my teaching and research contexts.

For example, being and becoming more intentional about how I spend my time working has been one of the most beneficial aspects taken forward from the sabbatical. Deeply held values, beliefs, and convictions inherent to my research and practice were mobilized throughout my sabbatical journey, but the time to reflect also led to a much-needed shift in outlook. The proactive pressing of a reset button was the result of authentically turning a reflexive lens squarely on myself and my work habits, and closely examining the exhausting lifestyle I had created. Recognition soon followed that I should not (could not?), realistically, maintain the pace I had set for myself prior to my sabbatical. Changes in health, lifestyle, and work habits remain a priority, but I’m still a work in progress. My punishing work ethic and inner drive to be successful in my work have not entirely retreated, but I now nurture and value the understanding that I must keep my finger on that reset button.

In the six years since the sabbatical, I have remained an active member of my university community, albeit having physically distanced myself long before the COVID-19 pandemic, and I no longer live in close proximity to campus. Acknowledging sage advice from Sibbald and Handford (2017), that “physical, emotional, and mental health need to be involved in the list of priorities and that work-life balance requires effort” (p. 266), I can viscerally relate to their point: “The mental aspect is fundamentally challenging because academics, generally, work with a mental capacity that can’t simply be turned off” (p. 266). The priority has been on creating work-life balance and the cultivation of praxis in the context of an ethic of care (Noddings, 2012)—care for my students and myself—including a move away from detrimental patterns of working too hard and making wiser professional choices. Palmer’s explication (1998) of the importance of resolving internal and external forces that jeopardize our abilities to live an undivided life speak volumes for me as I continue to wrestle with the role of my own identity, integrity, and personal Möbius
strip moving forward. This has meant purposefully abandoning fragmentation and concerns with who others might think I ought to be in the world rather than an understanding of who I choose to be in the world. To reiterate, as Pratchett (2012, p. 332) so eloquently put it: “Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving.”

At the time of writing, radical changes beyond our control have taken place in a very short time due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our society and ways of life, including restrictions on our ability to travel locally and overseas. With a second sabbatical on the horizon, the plans I had made to travel and present at conferences in New Zealand (cancelled) and in Bari, Italy (ISATT conference, postponed by a year), are no longer viable. However, my work will continue on a co-edited book project that is currently in process, and I will capitalize on the opportunity to “shelter in place” and focus on deep reading and on some other writing projects. To quote Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2018), “I am not certain how others will document their becoming, but I have chosen structures that suit my disposition, theoretical orientation, and writing life.” (p. 826). (In the sabbatical ahead, notwithstanding pandemic parameters, maybe, just maybe, I’ll try enjoying some of those “auxiliary benefits” too.)

At this stage in my career as an educator, with the next major transition after sabbatical most likely being retirement from full-time employment (and the hoops of tenure and promotion no longer of concern), I have the privilege of writing more for my own purposes (Lyle, 2019; Elliott-Johns, 2010; Peseta, 2009) and toward greater knowing, understanding, and acceptance of an undivided self.

To be whole is to be part;
true voyage is return. – Laia Asieo Odo

Ursula K. Le Guin (1974, p. 95)

References


