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Sabbatical Leave Report:

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Working Title: The State of Education in Post-Apocalyptic America

I want to thank former president, Dr. Marilyn Schlack; current President, Dr. L. Marshall Washington; the KVCC Board of Trustees; former Vice President of Human Resources, Sandy Bohnet; current Vice President of Human Resources, Aaron Hilliard; former Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dr. Dennis Bertch; acting Vice President of Academic Affairs, Paige Eagan; and the sabbatical committee for considering and approving my sabbatical leave. I also want to thank my dean, Billy Reynolds for his support in this endeavor. My research project for this sabbatical led me to some new truths about today's student demographic; the students we at KVCC serve; well-supported reasons for why changes have taken place in education in the U.S. since the tragic events of 9/11; and solid new pedagogical strategies we as teachers can implement to engage students with material in the classroom, retain them through to graduation, and confidently send them off with skills to make their lives and our world better.

Original Statement of Purpose:

The purpose of my sabbatical was to gather and compile research for a book about the changes, complex and layered, I've observed in education over the past seventeen years plus since the tragic terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. My focus was to have been students attending two-year community colleges and four year state colleges and universities. The work was to be more of a creative nonfiction memoir piece more so than a research project; however, I did aim to include some research as well. I proposed to use my own experiences but also interview teachers and professors who are currently teaching or recently retired—not just in Michigan but in as many other places in the country I could muster.

Activities Performed to Accomplish Desired Objectives:

I ambitiously included six objectives in my sabbatical proposal.

Objective One: *In my 28 years of teaching diverse English classes in universities, colleges, and high schools, I have seen changes in student skill levels, engagement in the class room, and lowered abilities to finish out the semester with a passing grade. I have worked hard before this project to find ways to ameliorate these problems but wanted to take the time on a sabbatical to really dig in. I wanted not only to explore what the changes were, the reasons for them, and strategies to understand how to better serve them and raise the status of their accomplishments*

in learning the skills they needed to negotiate a professional life but also a richer personal life and life as a responsible citizen in their communities.

Attached you will find a lengthy paper that indicates my findings for the first objective of my sabbatical. The paper entitled *The State of Education in Post-Apocalyptic America* combines memoir made up of my early years of teaching in diverse and complex demographics and moves to today's teaching environment since the tragic events of 911. Along the way, I have spoken casually with and actually interviewed diverse faculty from Kalamazoo College, Parchment High School, the University of North Carolina, James Madison University, Lock Haven University in Pennsylvania, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Utah Valley University, Central New Mexico Community College, the University of New Mexico, and KVCC. More teachers have let me know they are interested in discussing this topic with me. The paper doesn't include anyone but me and the research I've done at this point. My intention is to do so in future chapters.

I plan to send this chapter out to appropriate journals for publication and present it as a paper for a fitting conference in the future.

Objective Two: *I had wanted to explore reasons for the uptick in student violence and anger in the classroom, as well as the lack of student participation in class for fear of others judging their opinions.*

In the paper attached to this report, I include research on this topic but more so about how it causes unprecedented anxiety in our students rather than their own anger or violence. Thus far, I have not done much on exploring how many schools have developed in-house police departments to control violence on college campuses. I hope to do that for a future chapter.

Objective Three: *This objective deals with technology and online teaching, and my desire was to research whether or not these growing tools for education had any notable effects on today's students.*

My activities regarding this objective were two-fold. First, I actually taught two online classes of Freshman Comp; both classes were a wonderful experience for me and the student. The summer section contained students who were skilled and prepared for the course. We all bonded easily and nearly all 24 passed with high grades. The fall course had more students that dropped out with lower skills and motivation to complete the course. However, the ones who finished the course were motivated, positive, and connected to me and one another. In the attached paper, I write at length about the ways in which technology has affected today's students, especially cell phones and social media.

Objective Four: *I intended to interview other faculty to get their input about today's students and the changes, if any, they had experienced. Second, I wanted to examine what prevents students from curiosity and developing a desire to truly learn. I have been concerned about a growing apathy in the classroom and a sense of ennui. A colleague comes back from the classroom saying students seem "soulless."*

While I did talk to faculty, both active teachers and retired, from diverse institutions, I have not compiled any detailed info of others' commentaries. Diane Ravitch's revised edition of her groundbreaking book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, provided me with much history from the past twenty years to be able to note that the push for charter schools and infinite testing of our students have contributed greatly to the lack of skills they bring to the college classroom, including critical thinking and the ability to discuss ideas in a group setting. Students have been educated to prepare for testing mostly—a futile endeavor in creating feeling/sensing/thinking citizens. Also, in my research, I've discovered that students are protected from examining tough topics as the “trigger warning” in college classrooms have gained in popularity but are very controversial. Also, helicopter parents overly involved in their adult children's lives have causes students to internalize their parents' fears and expectations.

Besides reading articles and books on psychological topics, I also read books by educators, philosophers, and cultural investigators. An incomplete list serves as the Works Collected list at the end of my original sabbatical proposal.

With experimentation of books, topics, and films, much success greeted me this past summer and fall in my classes. Students are recognizing the critical times in which we live and are much more eager than students in the past to make a difference in the world and to be a part of something larger than themselves. This has been a difficult yet rewarding experimental teaching time for me. Difficult because nearly every class becomes intense with discussion and sometimes emotional reactions, but the students bond quickly and comment on how much they learned and that they have loved sharing their own personal stories and ideas with one another. I have been using strategies from Paul Hernandez's book, *The Pedagogy of Real Talk*, as well as those of Laura Rendón's research, *Sentapensante*, along with many others. Also, I always use a spiritual book in every one of my classes, which students love to both discuss and use in their writings.

Objective Five: *I wanted to research the depth of psychological issues and problems students experience today that interfere with their ability to complete the course at worst and not do as well as they could at best. I questioned why there wasn't more psychological counseling as well as educational counseling available. I wanted to get validation for my perception that students are overwhelmed, depressed, and anxious.*

First, I noticed that my school, KVCC, has doubled up if not more on psychological counseling programs for students, which is fantastic. I can now make referrals and get help and advice myself. Second, I have found much research that declares today's students the most anxious in the history of records kept on such statistics: much despair and suicidal ideation. These findings appear in the attached paper.

Objective Six: *For this objective, I wanted to discover the truth about how much economic hardships have increased over the last seventeen or so years to affect the success of our students. My concern stemmed from an abundance of absences because of work matters and family responsibilities.*

First, I discovered that public and state funding for KVCC alone over the past ten years has involved a loss of over a million dollars. Public funding, including grants and loans, have decreased immensely over the past decade and promise to decline more if our country does not step up and value quality education for the masses. Today, the main concern of the government is to make the rich richer and the powerful more powerful. This is scandalous. It must change. Second, it is true that the poor are getting poorer. I have made it a part of my work to talk to students and discover the hardships they endure in order to go to school. Even many younger students are responsible for taking care of their siblings and contributing financially to their family's budget. I had two students in the last academic year who told me they were homeless. Their parents had birthed another sibling, and there was no room in the house for the evicted child. The young woman lived with her alcoholic grandfather and the young man lived out of his car, deplorable situations for these young folk. It's no wonder they struggle in school or even get there in the first place.

Conclusions Drawn From Activities

Much more detailed information can be found within the attached paper as to conclusions drawn from my research and in conversations among colleagues. To summarize here, my research supports that education has undergone many changes since the 1970s, which have contributed to the dumbing down of the great American School System. Many school administrators don't even have education backgrounds; rather, they are from the corporate world, imposing their corporate ideas of school choice, privatization, and constant testing upon students. In addition, the student population has changed as generations of students who are primarily young people in the system change over time. However, these students have been found to be dealing with unprecedented anxiety and mental health issues, including suicide ideation. I found support for my theory that the climate of the United States and the world in general has changed forever since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, known familiarly as 9/11. An unprecedented culture of fear has influenced many facets of life for Americans today, as well as populations in other countries. The constant and growing culture of war tangentially serves as possible further research for me on my topic of change in student demographics and educational change; however, I'm not sure I'll pursue this further.

There is much research that supports the fact that while technological tools have their advantages in a personal and educational setting, they are also causing addictive behaviors and changes in the state of one's brain cells that are not positive. This is true especially for cell phones, which then piggyback onto the problem of social media overuse, and which further leads young people especially to feel a low sense of self-esteem, judgment from their peers, bullying, and the ironic paradox of not wanting to be seen but at the same time desperate to be seen, heard, valued.

I write about my personal experience being a teacher in the early years of my career and how the diverse population of the Southwest was my demographic with Mexican immigrants, diverse Indian tribes, immigrants from the Middle East, and other cultures from all over the world. I taught in many venues, including Indian colleges, universities, community colleges, and high schools. I had to pull out alternative methods other than those found in traditional settings in order to reach many of my students. This is detailed in the attached chapter. Somehow as the years went by, I found students harder and harder to reach even in my 15 years at KVCC up till

now. I tried getting stricter in every area, which only made student resistance worse. I have returned to my ways of teaching in the beginning of my career but also have been researching educators such as Paul Hernandez and Laura Rendón. Hernandez's book *Pedagogy of Real Talk* and Rendón's research entitled *Sentapensante* have paved the way for me to experiment with change that has suited my retention and engagement of students in the classroom, allowing them to achieve more success in my courses. Becoming a bonded group has been a real change in the classroom environment and even in my online classes because I have added a deeply spiritual and personal component to my teaching strategies without dumbing down academic expectations. More can be found in the attached paper.

Finally, regarding other educators' thoughts on whether or not changes have occurred since 9/11, I have often encountered strangers coming up to me in grocery stores, saying, "Here's my card. I overheard you talking to the checkout person about your sabbatical topic. Please call me. I feel the same way you do. I can't seem to engage my students the way I used too. It's become a real problem." Another woman I didn't know who teaches at KVCC part time and at Parchment High School full time overheard me talking to a colleague in the computer lab about this dilemma. She said, "Oh, my gosh! Can I give you my email? I don't even know what to do about students anymore." I have also visited many colleagues around the country or communicated by phone and email, with friends from grad school who have retired because they couldn't deal with students any more who seem "empty," "soulless," "dead," and many other descriptions of troubled humans. I have also spoken often with colleagues who are still in the trenches determined to make a difference today in their teaching despite the uphill climb.

I had wanted to write three chapters while on sabbatical but much other work interfered. I did write a very long chapter attached here to give the flavor of the many tasks and projects I want to include in this book: part memoir of my teaching experiences; part theoretical research on diverse strategies involving teaching, students, and education; new trends and their effects on education; and interviews with people on the front lines doing this work. I have assembled material that will serve as a good foundation for all of this and more.

The other conclusion I have found is that it's difficult to settle on a concrete intention for a book because so many unexpected things come along that are surprises, material you didn't think of initially, and so many wonderful voices that sound their agreement: yes, change has occurred since 9/11 and we need to work hard towards supporting the positive and eliminating the negative factors that thwart our young people in not only obtaining a good education that leads to a profession by which to support themselves and their families but also to become engaged citizens and life-long learners who seek to find a purpose larger than themselves.

How Criteria for Sabbatical Leave Proposals Were Addressed:

1. My work allowed me to experiment with research in the classroom Face to Face and also online, thus contributing immensely to my professional development and student success.
2. It supported the college's mission on all scores and will help improve services to students and others we serve, including faculty and staff support. I worked more closely during and after my

sabbatical than I ever have with the counseling department, especially with Laura Cosby, as well as Service Learning coach and chaplain of WMU, Kathleen Robertson King.

3. My sabbatical work helped me to come closer to ameliorating the deep, frustrating problem of how to reach students today. As Paul Hernandez said in his recent Seminar Days keynote speech, "It's really hard at first, but if you climb on board, it only gets easier."

4. My sabbatical work helped be to become a better teacher rather than a cynical old woman hanging on to a dream that turned into a nightmare. I do dream of becoming better and better, kinder and kinder, and more loving with my students so they can break the chains that keep them fearful and quiet, anxious and confused. Then they can accomplish learning more than they ever thought possible.

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3 January 2019

The State of Education in Post-Apocalyptic America*

*By “post-apocalyptic,” I am referring to the horrific terrorist attacks of 9/11 that, as I view it, aren’t directly responsible for changes I’ve observed in education in the U.S.; however, this event does mark the time when I’ve noticed these changes slowly begin to occur. Second, I must also acknowledge the blanket of fear that has covered the land since 9/11, however. Opportunists in many fields, including government, media, advertisers, and corporations, to name a few, have benefitted greatly in selling fear to the masses and continue to do so. There is no doubt in my mind that a culture of fear relates to changes I’ve seen in the classroom since then.

This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.

Toni Morrison,
“No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear”
The Nation, April 6, 2015

Since the tragedy of 9/11, and particularly around 2006 just before the financial collapse in the U.S., I have felt a growing concern about changes in the college classroom culture; students who live there, along with me in the role of teacher; and how to deliver to students the necessary educational components of each of my diverse English classes in a successful, engaging way that helps them achieve success. By success, I mean finishing the course through to the end of the semester with a passing or better grade, which leads them to graduate and find a satisfying profession, of course. But by success, I also mean something more intrinsic and personal. I want my students to take away tools that last all of their lives—tools of communication that help them connect with others in a satisfying way. Tools of the heart as well as of the mind, allowing them to practice forgiving themselves for whatever they consider shortcomings or mistakes, along with practicing empathy and compassion for others. Tools they’ve

developed and will continue to develop long after our time together that help them realize the satisfaction and joy of being part of something bigger than themselves.

I grew up as a teacher during the 1990s in as diverse a place you could find in the U.S., the American Southwest. As a grad student, I taught two courses a semester in the English Department at the University of New Mexico, through Masters and Ph.D. degrees. I also taught regularly on the Navajo reservation in the Four Corners of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado at Diné College and in Albuquerque at Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute. For one year, I taught Alternative Learner, grades nine through 12, and senior English at Bernalillo High School in Bernalillo, New Mexico. For thirteen years, I had my challenges as a teacher, not only with the local diverse populations of Indian tribes, Anglos, Mexican immigrants, and local Mexican natives but also immigrants from Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 1990s, particularly Kurdish people from Iraq who escaped genocide at the hands of Saddam Hussein. As a result of teaching in such diverse communities, I became well-practiced in ways of teaching and learning within a population that needed to be met wherever they were at the time—socioeconomically, linguistically, and in educational experiences. My teaching strategies needed to have expectations that students left my classes being able to successfully write a college paper or creative writing project, as well as write papers and prepare for and pass tests for courses in literature. To do that, I had to reach them on a more personal level and find connection there, along with using assignments through which they could connect with the course material and with one another. However, little of my practice and experience prepared me for the student culture of today. I could tell so many stories about lots of failures and precious few successes and will do so in future chapters. But in this introductory chapter, let me keep it to a couple short tales.

I remember how hard the students in my first-year freshman English course at UNM laughed when I mispronounced their names: Jennifer Troo-jill-o wafted across the classroom followed by gales of laughter, making me realize I had to brush up on my Spanish and fast. Later in my career at Bernalillo High School, my senior English class refused to read or write papers on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, so I got art supplies from the newly-stocked art department and had students paint or sculpt an idea from the play. They became motivated and excited to create their projects, and several weeks later, brought them to class. There were sculptures of the witches and their cauldron, paintings of blood-stained Lady Macbeth, and so many other wonderful creations. We invited the whole community of Bernalillo to an art show, where they displayed their work. We had refreshments, and administrators came, along with other classes and their teachers. We all loved it. And them. And I could tell they felt seen and heard, which caused me to realize the importance of that seemingly-simple act. For winter semester after the holidays, I gave them choices to use artistic modalities to create art projects focusing on the literature we read, or they could choose to write papers on class assignments. To my surprise, many of the students wrote papers, knowing they needed to practice if they were going to succeed in college or even get accepted into college.

Another time when I was teaching English and literature at Southwestern Indian Polytech, I parked my car behind the classrooms and walked up and over a crest students called "Broken Bottle Hill" to the back door of the classroom. After the weekend, many crushed beer cans and broken liquor bottles littered the land. I felt anger rising in me and knew I had to get ahold of myself, realizing that anger was really sadness. I walked through the door of the classroom where students had arranged themselves into a circle as usual. "I want you guys to come with me and bring a notebook and a pen," I said. They looked at each other, shrugged, and

did as I asked. When we got to the hill, I said, “Look at what grew here over the weekend. I’d like you all to sit on the ground or lie on it and write a poem about what you see here.” The students were reluctant at first, perhaps not knowing what to do. But they eventually began.

“Are you going to show these to anybody?” someone asked.

“Not unless you give me permission,” I said.

After an hour or so, we went back into the classroom and slowly students became vulnerable enough to be willing to share what they had written. Once again, I saw the students’ growing joy at being seen, seeing others, and most of all, connecting with one another. They worked on their poems for another week, and I had them bound into a book, which I gave them at the end of the semester. This is a practice I carry on to this day.

These are experiences I have never forgotten, which helped me develop teaching strategies that met students where they were and helped me cultivate an environment in which my goal was for each student to be seen and heard. The work of the late Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, also came into my life in a graduate course on rhetoric, which aided me in my new-found pedagogical strategies. In the 1960s, Freire conceptualized the idea of critical consciousness or in Portuguese, *Conscientização*, which

calls for the understanding of social realities from both epistemological and critical perspectives as the basis for the effective and sustainable transformation of said realities. The concept is an invitation to take strong critical stances about history, society, and even politics as the first step to meaningful change.

Conscientização is utopian in nature, understood not as mere idealism, but as critical knowledge that becomes a source of hope. In that sense, the idea provides both a space to denounce social inequity and critically question society at large

and a moment for social agents to begin to propose the kind of society for which they strive. (Mora)

I would have to say that as a result of my birth as a teacher and growing pains thereafter, which, of course, continue, I became politicized in the classroom to not only emphasize good strategies for writing an academic paper and other intellectual pursuits but also became one who consistently offers topics and discussions on social justice and personal responsibility. The criticism of such teaching philosophies in the classroom has not daunted me. Just like the pedagogical strategies I introduce in this chapter later, this form of teaching doesn't appeal to everyone, which is good because students need to be exposed to diverse teachers and their diverse methodologies. However, these critical theoretical strategies have always blessed me, as they may bless you, with enough success in motivating students to care about something larger than themselves. Also, these strategies have helped to encourage students to become lifelong learners engaged with the world around them and question their place in it—even now as I struggle to engage students in the classroom, not only with what I've mentioned thus far, but to even get a smile, a nod, a word, sometimes it feels like an impossible struggle that won't end. I am one of the characters in Samuel Beckett's absurdist play, *Waiting for Godot*. I am wondering who or what will come along to save me. Sometimes from myself. With all I had learned, practiced and implemented in the classroom in those years of my early development in the '90s decade, I have had a difficult time drawing students out currently, especially in the past decade. It is difficult not to be discouraged sometimes, but recently, I have been introduced to ideas from psychologists, researchers, and educators that I have put in the teaching basket along with what I already have learned, practiced these strategies this past semester, and am beginning to be hopeful about reaching more students in the classroom and bringing myself to a place of

acceptance that yes, of course our world changes and will continue to do so; I must adapt and address change head and heart on.

This past fall semester, I went to work in earnest to ameliorate lack of student engagement in the classroom. Of course, I knew I had to save myself. I studied, researched, read books and papers, watched videos, and talked to many current and retired teachers K through 12 and college professors. Some of those professors have retired early, unable or unwilling to negotiate today's college classrooms. I listened, listened, listened. And then listened some more.

However, this introductory chapter focuses on my own teaching experiences rather than input from colleagues in order to help me find at least some answers, strategies, and a newborn theoretical movement that can (and has) renewed me as a teacher. Generally speaking, students in the stories I have told earlier in this chapter were more willing to be vulnerable and take risks than students today. They were more willing to participate in discussion during class time and seemed to realize quickly that discussions were the bread crumbs that led them to the transition of writing papers. They seem not to know how to engage in class discussions, which is also true about the basic skills they bring to the course. I have many ill-prepared students who are unable to do basic passing work and spend most of the semester catching up. Second, in today's classroom, I feel much more like I'm walking on egg shells regarding students' sensitivity to topics, readings, and discussions. Third, it's difficult to get students to share their work in class with one another whereas in the past, it was not. Fourth, students are very interested in getting a good grade but don't seem to be as interested in what they must do in order to achieve their goal. It's difficult to get across to them the value of what they are studying—especially if they're "not interested" in it. Fifth, a complete irony exists in the fact that they do not want to be seen or heard but at the same time, there seems to be a desperation to be seen and heard. Sixth, I have

noticed many more students suffering from anxiety than in the past to the point where it sometimes becomes debilitating, and they have to leave the class either in the moment or permanently. Seventh, there is an extent to which their anxiety is fed by a culture of fear that isn't getting any better and, in fact, is getting worse.

Brené Brown, author and research professor at the University of Houston grad school of social work says,

I started my research just very coincidentally six months before 911, and so over the course of the last twelve years, I have seen fear absolutely run roughshod over our families, and I have seen us go to these crazy lengths to protect ourselves and our children from the uncertainty that the world has become. I've not only seen that through my lens as a researcher and certainly experienced it as a parent, but also as a college professor. (Brown "The Courage to be Vulnerable")

Brown says many students she encounters have never had real experiences with adversity and how that shows up is as hopelessness. She sees a profound sense of hopelessness among students, and in her own research, she cites C.R. Snyder's work from the University of Kansas that "hope is a function of struggle" (Brown, "The Courage to be Vulnerable") She says, "Hope is not an emotion but hope is a cognitive, behavioral process that we learn when we experience adversity, when we have relationships that are trustworthy, when people have faith in our ability to get out of a jam" (Brown "The Courage to be Vulnerable").

Brown ties in the familiar term "helicopter parents," discussing how parents want to shield their children from struggle and failure, which foster shame and guilt for losing. But she says these are the very experiences that make us "brave, courageous, and willing to be vulnerable." Brown advocates that we become vulnerable in our world as individuals, whatever

work we do, but especially points to the profession of teaching. She says, “Feeling vulnerable, imperfect, and afraid is human. It’s when we lose our capacity to hold space for these troubles that we become dangerous” (Brown “The Courage to be Vulnerable”). Brown says, “I think about families, I think about organizations, I think about community. I think we’re awakening maybe from a period of deep disengagement” (Brown “The Courage to be Vulnerable”). More and more, I share Brown’s optimism.

In a more recent lecture she presents to an audience of educators, she states, “Often, the greatest thing we lose in a classroom is our vulnerability. When vulnerability becomes only in the realm of the privileged, we have lost the capacity to create a home, a school, a country that we love” (Brown “Daring Classrooms”). Brown believes that if we are willing to be excruciatingly uncomfortable and vulnerable, we can create a space in the classroom that’s the only place a student wants to be, just has to be, in order to “take the armor off his or her heart. Shame cannot happen in that classroom. No vulnerability, no learning” (Brown “Daring Classrooms”).

In her *New York Times* article, “Why are More American Teenagers than Ever Suffering from Severe Anxiety?” Benoit Denizet-Lewis states, “[A]nxiety has taken over depression as the most common reason college students seek counseling services,” followed by a litany of statistics to prove it. Of course, anxiety has an evolutionary purpose to keep us safe from potentially dangerous situations. But highly-anxious people today often perceive threats that aren’t even there. Lewis says, “Privileged youth are among the most emotionally distressed young people in America. They are anxious and perfectionistic.” Reasons for this include helicopter parents whose own anxiety their children have internalized. Other populations of youth can be anxious because they live in unsafe neighborhoods, and they also feel unsafe

because they have a history of trauma and abuse. Then of course the contemporary political climate contributes to youth feeling unsafe because of undocumented relatives, school shootings, and sex trafficking, to name a few.

Psychologist Stephanie Eken states, “Kids worry more than ever about terrorism. They wonder about whether it’s safe to go to a movie theater. . .also, social media plays a major role in anxiety issues where kids compare themselves to others they see and feel they don’t measure up” (Denizet-Lewis). Today’s adolescents have OCD-type digital habits according to research. It’s around the clock. Even teens agree themselves, saying, “It’s a great tool but it’s making us crazy because we can’t live without it” (Denizet-Lewis).

A recent *60 Minutes* episode featured Jean Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University. At first in her ground-breaking research on teen use of social media and cell phones, she was skeptical about blaming internet use for teen anxiety. Later she changed her mind because of the spike in depressed teens, which was sharp and significant. She says that despite the improvement of the economy since the banking and real estate crash, social media and smart phones “seem culpable for increase in teen mental health” (“Ground-breaking Study”).

Another reason for the spike in adolescent anxiety according to Denizet-Lewis is that students aren’t allowed to fail or be exposed to sensitive material, especially in the classroom; thus, they don’t have the opportunity to develop their “resilience.” This brings to mind the work of the late Israeli medical social theorist, Aaron Antonovsky, who coined the term “salutogenesis,” which describes an approach to studying why some people thrive in crisis while others don’t, focusing on factors that support human health and well-being rather than on factors that cause disease (pathogenesis). He defined human resilience in the face of suffering as having a “sense of coherence,” which is a strong characteristic developed in some people that helps

them get through the really tough times in life. But if people are protected, they don't have the chance to develop this resilience or sense of coherence about their world. "Kids are being given some really dangerous messages these days about. . .being triggered, that they shouldn't have to be witness to anything that makes them uncomfortable and that their external environments should bend to and accommodate their needs" (Denizet-Lewis).

Denizet-Lewis interviewed a school counselor who told her more and more students struggle to recover from minor setbacks and aren't equipped to problem solve or advocate for themselves effectively. So as they struggle with anxiety, they drop out—"stop coming to school because they just can't." Some schools have "special classrooms," where students can feel safe, but these are criticized for not preparing students for the "real world." Patrick Hovey, Director of Services at Roxbury High states, "But you have to start where the kids are, not where you are or where you want them to be. We've got to get them in the building. Many of our students simply don't come to school if they have to spend all day in general ed classes" (Denizet-Lewis). He goes on to say that once the students are actually in school, staff can help build their confidence and skills to eventually transition to regular classes, where they can prepare for college or a job once they graduate.

Before I go on to outline several studies that include alternative pedagogical strategies to consider in these challenging times, I want to mention the work of Diane Ravitch, Research Professor of Education at New York University and former Assistant Secretary of Education for George W. Bush. Her research on testing and school choice is ground breaking and vast, and I want to be sure to note these two elements of public school philosophies have made a huge impact on changes I've observed—especially with endless testing, which I participated in reluctantly in high school education in the '90s. Many students today often tell me that they

didn't write much in their high school classes; they mainly were skilled and drilled to pass tests, which I find to be another reason students have difficulty today becoming engaged with one another and the material we study in class. For most of their educational experiences, many tell me they haven't practiced critically thinking about readings and practiced writing about the world of ideas. Also, teachers in these positions cannot help but follow the mandatory strategies for testing because their jobs are on the line. Others quit or retire early. In the epilogue of her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Ravitch states,

[We] need to reorient our social and educational vision to see each and every child as a precious human being, a person of endless potential. A child must not be rated by his or her test scores, or defined by his or her family demographics, but should be understood as a person who is growing, developing, in need of adult guidance, and in need of challenging and liberating education, an education of possibilities and passion.

We need a strong and vibrant public education system. We need to give our children a good start in life. None of this is outside our reach or grasp, although such ideas are far from our present rhetoric and strategies for education reform. Our future as a nation depends on our actions today. (301)

So what strategies can we as teachers use successfully in our classrooms to meet the changes that have taken place over the past several decades? Sometimes, it feels as though we must start from scratch with student engagement and a willingness to try something new when traditional pedagogical strategies don't seem to work as easily as they have in the past. Of course, some disciplines are easier than others to experiment with challenging the status quo in order to deliver the promise of the course curricula. However, many college professors I found in research use alternative pedagogical strategies in disciplines such as math, science, art, and

literature. The following educators and their work, Paul Hernandez's *The Pedagogy of Real Talk* and Laura Rendón's *Sentepensante (Sensing/Thinking)*, offer new ways to paint the classroom different colors. I want to finish with a brief overview of these researchers and teachers. Later on in this book, I will devote more detailed chapters to each of them and others. Stop here.

Paul Hernandez worked in the HEP Program for agricultural a migrants and farm workers and in the GED program, with at risk students at Michigan State University. He had been an at risk student himself, coming from the streets of L.A. He writes that he wasn't supposed to live to see his sixteenth birthday, "let alone achieve any level of personal success" (xi). He writes, "I went from a disengaged, standoffish, apathetic, disruptive student who seldom went to school to a young man who embraced education and recognized it as a source of empowerment that would help me change the world for the better" (xi). Against the odds, he went through undergraduate studies feeling like quitting many times and finally achieved a Ph.D. He has helped "develop, assess, and restructure educational initiatives; created programming; conducted workshops; delivered keynotes; and trained educators, administrators, and others" (xii) in his approach, all to help others empower students to succeed in higher education.

In his book, *The Pedagogy of Real Talk*, he states that the most important aspect of teaching is to make connections. In order to do that, we as educators need to understand our students and where they're coming from, especially students at risk. First, they experience circumstances within themselves and/or in their environments that put them in vulnerable positions to have problems in school. Second, they may have issues such as ADHD, limited knowledge in skills and social conduct, along with emotional and behavioral problems. Third, they are affected by their environment, which may include gang violence and drugs, homelessness, limited support for learning, negative interactions at school and at home, or

between school and home. Fourth, they are prone to having low self-confidence with schoolwork, avoidance of school, distrust of adults, limited notions of an academic future, and fragile home lives. I have seen and dealt with all of these issues at KVCC. Hernandez writes that we as educators need to view students as people first and not relegate the personal to a place outside the classroom. The personal comes through the door along with the student. We need to remember that we as people also have personal issues that affect our teaching; and like our students, we can only try to do our very best to overcome them.

In his book, he charts the characteristics of successful teachers as having

1. the ability to relate personally to students.
2. the ability to teach students.
3. a positive attitude toward them.

He writes that in order to relate, teachers must realize on a deep level that their experience is and has been different from ours. Listen to students and be willing to connect. Be flexible, creative, and dynamic. Go beyond the minimum in your efforts to reach students, remembering they are people first. Encourage personal interactions and be positive, accepting, and caring. Always keep trying something new, such as asking students to write about when they felt they belonged or didn't belong; when they felt like an outsider; write about a memory of your favorite day or a crappy day. Clearly, it takes teachers willing to be vulnerable in the words of Brené Brown to work with Hernandez's "Real Talk" strategy. The best way I can summarize it is to bring the students' lives and experiences into the classroom as part of the work of the class in addition to texts or films or other material typically used.

This past fall, I asked students in a three-hour class to write about an incident or event in their lives that politicized them. A few asked what "politicized" means. I told them to look it up

on their phones. After writing for about twenty minutes, I asked for volunteers to read. Slowly students raised their hands. The first young woman wrote about finding her best friend dead in a bedroom at a party from drug overdose. She wrote her final research paper on the oxycodone epidemic in our country today. Two other students came out as gay, and a young woman in the police academy told of emotional and physical abuse she experienced from her father, which is why she wanted to go into criminal justice. An African American man read his response about becoming politicized when he realized it was time to sit his two sons down and tell them about dangers for black people in the streets and how to handle themselves when stopped by police. One student wrote about how 9/11 politicized him as a young boy; he turned this writing prompt into an eight-page essay, which he submitted into the Best Student Essay Contest at KVCC. The readings and conversation lasted two hours and we couldn't believe it was time to end the class. This exercise became the turning point for students to become vulnerable and write really authentic papers on a number of topics using our readings in class on contemporary subjects such as light pollution, climate change, racial profiling, compassion and empathy, the unexamined gift of literacy, and many more.

Another educator and researcher who has devoted herself to reaching and retaining students, especially at-risk students, is Laura Rendón. Her research can be found in her book *Sentipensante (SENSING/THINKING) Pedagogy*. The philosophy of sentipensante is explained by Eduardo Galeano, Uruguayan writer, journalist, and novelist, in his book *The Book of Embraces*:

Why does one write, if not to put one's pieces together?

From the moment we enter school or church, education chops us into pieces; it teaches us to divorce soul from body and mind from heart.

The fishermen of the Columbian coast must be learned doctors of ethics and morality, for they invented the word, *sentipensante*, feeling-thinking, to define language that speaks the truth. (Rendón 131)

Galeano calls *sentipensante* “Celebration of the Marriage of Heart and Mind” (Galeano 121). The foundation of it is to bring together the intellect and rational thinking with intuition and feeling, the heart and mind together in the classroom. “His stance is that “rationality and intuition can exist in dynamic and complimentary opposition. This idea has always existed but Western philosophers privileged and assumed rationality and intellect alone were the key to understanding” (131). Rendón’s research that makes up a good portion of her book centers on two-year and four-year college professors who have already chosen to teach with similar liberatory philosophies of teaching. Their disciplines include math, chemistry, English, communications, physical education, sociology, African American Studies, psychology, education, and art. She extensively features the failures and successes of these fifteen teachers in order to continuously critique what works for this strategy of teaching and what may need some tweaking. All of these fifteen teachers from diverse disciplines have a desire to continue to create their classes centered on the marriage of heart and mind. Each of these teachers felt alone in their journeys using *sentipensante* strategies until they learned about the other professors in the study that engage students intellectually with course content but also include their life experiences and struggles similarly to Paul Hernandez’s *Real Talk*.

Sentipensante pedagogy is “a teaching and learning model approach based on wholeness, harmony, social justice, and liberation,” derived from Rendón’s experiences in the classroom and as a researcher discovering what works and what doesn’t work to create connection with students. Rendón asks,

What does it mean to be truly educated in the world today? We are being challenged to educate students for a complex future with never-ending, ever more difficult social, political, and cultural challenges that test our ability to make sound, ethical, and moral decisions, as well as to make the world peaceful, equitable, and survivable. A *senipensante* approach strives to foster the educated person of the 21st Century. (135)

The three goals of *senipensante* pedagogy are to disrupt and transform entrenched belief systems of education that act against wholeness and appreciation of truth in all forms. Second, to cultivate "*personas educadas*", well-rounded individuals who possess knowledge and wisdom, who are able to work with facts, as well as with diverse forms of information and theoretical perspectives, applying knowledge with intuitive awareness and common sense. The third goal is to "instill in learners a commitment to sustain life, maintain the rights of all people, and preserve nature and the harmony of our world. A sensing-thinking pedagogy is also concerned with eliciting social awareness within the student and teacher and some form of social change in and out of the classroom" (136).

These classroom and research ideas give me hope to continue teaching and learning with the intention of focusing not only on the skills students need to learn in the course but also in finding our humanity together in the classroom on the short semester's journey by continuing to foster vulnerability and authenticity and not just addressing the mind but also the body, heart, and spirit. While I started out my teaching career with these ideas in mind, I lost my way and began to believe the answer to students' lack of preparedness to perform the most basic skills in my classes was to become more strict, insist on more stringent boundaries, and create an environment filled with tension, stress, and worry for both the students and me instead of

working to create an environment of loving kindness. These teachers and researchers summarized in this chapter have helped me find my way back to what works in my classrooms and can work in yours if you give it a chance. Further chapters that follow detail the work of Hernandez, Rendón, and other classroom workers who embrace liberation and new agreements that meet the challenges of not only educating our students today but also creating a safe haven where they can make connections, be themselves, and connect with others, as well as achieve intellectual and professional success.

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PROPOSAL FOR LABBITICAL LEAVE Winter 2018

Applicant:

Gloria Larrieu English Department Instructor

Submitted:

November 2016

Requested Date for Proposed Sabbatical:

Winter Semester 2018 (Jan. 8 through April 30)

Statement of Purpose:

The purpose of my sabbatical leave is to begin compiling gathered material for a book about how I have observed changes in education over the past twenty years that are complex and layered. My focus lies primarily with student demographics in both the community college and four-year university setting and will be more in the vein of creative non-fiction than research non-fiction, although I intend to include research in this project, as well as non-fiction personal essays based on my own experiences as a teacher, experiences of students, and experiences of colleagues here at KVCC and of those who teach at universities and colleges all over the country.

Narrative Description:

Working title: College Teaching Experiences in Post-Apocalyptic America (The title refers to September 11, 2001 and the changes over these past nearly two decades I and other teachers are experiencing in our classrooms. My intention is to create a teaching memoir of my observations and also include those of colleagues at diverse colleges around the country.

First, I have been teaching college-level English for 27 years, and in my 13 years of teaching here at KVCC, I have noticed marked changes in what it takes as a teacher to get students through my courses having learned adequately how to critically think and write, not only top-notch college papers, but also papers that even earn a 2.0. Especially over the past five years, I have experienced a marked difference in students' ability to do the most basic tasks and assignments. In order to retain students in the classroom and keep them from failing, I have had to constantly work on pedagogical strategies, changing them from semester to semester, to get students up to par in writing even a passing essay or research paper. I have found a majority of students unable to accomplish the most basic tasks, such as comprehending the main idea in an article or essay; critically thinking about a topic; integrating other texts with their own papers; writing with relatively few errors of grammar and punctuation by the end of the semester; and revising papers throughout the semester to a passable state. In addition, students are silent in the classroom when in the past, most students became fully engaged in discussion and shared a

willingness to offer their opinions on the various topics arising in the classroom out of films, handouts, and books used therein. I often feel I'm expected to be the entertainer in front of the class to keep them interested and, well, . . . entertained. Besides grieving it, I want to explore the causes of their silence and lack of engagement.

Second, along with changes in students themselves, the culture of college teaching now has also changed to include policing student behaviors because of the uptick in student violence and school shootings, requiring many schools to build a campus security department that morphs into a full-blown public police department. Also, classrooms seem to no longer be safe havens of academic freedom because some students are fearful of voicing their ideas, and some are more readily triggered into reacting angrily or violently to others' opinions or even the course content.

Third, technology and online teaching have affected the learning environment greatly. If students aren't prepared for a Face-to-Face class, then it translates into not being independent enough to succeed in online or hybrid classes. Another aspect of technology is the way it has engulfed our lives, especially those of young people who are often attached to techno devices in an umbilical way. Over years of time, this has got to have an effect on aspects of learning and on the brain, such as focus, critical thinking, and reading comprehension. I want to explore this area in regard to contemporary education issues.

Fourth, I want to explore this topic through writing, research, and interviews with others because it gnaws at me deeply and takes up much of my consciousness as an educator today. Indeed, I want to begin an exploration into what has happened in American education over the past twenty years to undermine the depth of students' college experience. Also, I want to examine what prevents them from becoming curious life-long learners and keeps them from cultivating a desire to become well-informed citizens in our nation and world.

Fifth, students in the past few years have more and more complicated psychological problems that interfere with their ability to achieve goals in the college classroom. Part of the problem is there seems to not be enough affordable counseling for students, and most of us teachers are not equipped to deal with the desperate state of many students. I often look out into the classroom at a sea of tired, distraught faces, and the best I can achieve is to create a safe harbor for them to share part of their plight. This often must happen first before we can even address the subject at hand in an environment where they can feel safe.

Sixth, economic issues plague students more than ever. They often are compromised not only to work jobs for their own support but also because their families depend upon their help. It's really difficult to tell students who desperately need to work their inadequate minimum-wage jobs that they can't pass the class by being absent so much, yet how can I pass a student who misses so much class and thus cannot possibly attain a passing grade point?

Thanks to a sabbatical seven years ago (sabbatical report 2011 attached) that planted the seeds to write a book of creative non-fiction, I completed three chapters while away from teaching. Now that book is nearly complete as a memoir with eleven chapters, entitled *Last Breath of the White Leviathan*. As a teacher of writing, I believe it is important to keep my hand in writing my own work and sharing it with my students, which I often do in my classes. However, with the heavy

b. To write on a regular daily basis, which is not possible during a regular semester's teaching load at KVCC. Because of teaching responsibilities, which have grown more complex in recent years, it is not possible to write on a daily basis in order to get a volume of work even to a first draft stage. Having the time to give to the act of daily writing would be amazing.

c. To write stories of my teaching experiences and my concern about today's educational milieu is an important commitment and objective for me as a writing teacher who walks the talk and writes herself. Students have told me how much they get out of reading my work in class, especially when they get to give me feedback on my strengths and weaknesses. They see my struggle as well as their own to write the truth from my heart as well as my head.

In a recent letter I received from a former student in a creative non-fiction writing class, she said she had not been used to a teacher sharing her work in class in such a vulnerable way before and that it made a huge difference in her ability to be vulnerable in writing her own pieces but also it taught her to go to a whole new level in her writing. Therefore, the writing I do, especially stories I will write of my teaching experiences and concern about today's educational milieu, is important for me to commit to as a writing teacher who walks the talk and writes herself.

As this project develops into a book, I may have the humbling experience of contributing to the betterment of higher education, reaching as many people as I can around the country who are as concerned as I am about the condition of education in these contemporary times.

2. Research:

a. To spend time researching various applicable topics in the fields of culture and education to name a few in libraries around the country as I travel to visit colleagues and colleges in North Carolina, Colorado, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and Arizona. Topics proposed as follows:

- What are other colleges experiencing as challenges in teaching the student demographic today?
- How are they making curriculum changes or developing courses and pedagogical strategies to deal with these challenges?
- How has technology impacted young people today as far as the negative and positive effects of using so many devices and so freely?
- What kinds of blockage are students coping with that serve as roadblocks to their personal, emotional, psychological, and educational success?
- Do concerns of educating our young people today also exist in other countries' educational institutions and how are they dealing with them?
- What have my specific experiences told me about the need to address problems outlined in this proposal and how have I developed ways and strategies of teaching to cope with them?
- How successful have I been in my relationships with students over the most recent five years, and what has worked to help solve some of these problems?

Of course, more topics will likely arise as I proceed with this work.

load of classes in community college teaching, it is nearly impossible to practice my craft. A sabbatical would give me that opportunity to write every day in a focused environment and also help me grow more as a teacher. In order to get a good foothold on this book project, a sabbatical would allow me time to:

1. **Reflect and research:** Reflecting on the journal I maintain on this topic of education and changes I've observed will be essential in completing the book project. Also, researching through study of books and articles I've collected on the topic (separate list attached), as well as interviews with professionals in the field and students with whom I've already begun the conversation, will bring together other voices to collaborate with me in this conversation.
2. **Write:** Having the rare luxury of writing every day to create a more formalized draft than the journal I noodle in at this time when my teaching load is heavy will allow me to bring at least three chapters to completion in first draft form, maybe more. This is true especially in organizing ideas in such a complexly layered project.
3. **Collaborate:**
 - by traveling to colleges around the country to discuss these issues with former colleagues.
 - by interviewing my colleagues here at KVCC and at WMU.
 - by attending The Conference on World Affairs in Boulder, Colorado, the first week of April, 2018, which includes many presentations on the topic of education in particular.
 - by starting immediately to gather experiences colleagues have related to me, such as an adjunct history instructor who can no longer use essay exams as a rubric because students don't know how to write them. Another professor told me that more and more teachers are using graphic novels and nonfiction books in the classroom because students refuse to read or even buy the books. Another professor at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill puts together a small packet of poems for students to purchase at the bookstore. They either refuse to read whole books or seem incapable of digesting long works any more.

Specific Objectives

1. Writing three complete chapters in first draft form that directs itself to an overview of education in the past and that of today:
 - a. To include the following topics and perhaps more: 1. Essay on my experience in the classroom from 1990 through 2000 in two all-Native American colleges (Southwestern Indian Polytech and Dine College); at the University of New Mexico; and at Central New Mexico Community College. 2. Essay on my teaching experiences at KVCC post-9/11 beginning in 2003. 3. Essay chapter on the last decade of my experiences teaching college-level writing at KVCC, exploring the noted changes that have occurred during this last decade and including input from students and teachers.

b. To do some research, even though my genre is creative non-fiction, in order to weave my own experiences and ideas together with other writers' scholarly works that address the subject of education and change, issues and challenges. (See attached page of works collected thus far.)

c. To keep abreast of current issues, challenges, strategies, concerns, and scholarship on the topic of what has happened in education to create changes in our students' abilities to become engaged in the classroom, it is important to commit myself to some research, not only for this project and sabbatical proposal but also, and most important, to continue to grow as an effective teacher in the classroom, knowing what strategies work and that should be kept in the curriculum and which ones need to be eliminated because they no longer work as pedagogical strategies. Also, I want to learn new strategies from other educators for motivating students in the classroom.

3. Expected Dollar Value of Any Grants:

I haven't applied for any grants, fellowships, advances or even workshops for this body of work for sabbatical leave and expect not a jot of income out of it.

Someday down the road (maybe when I retire, I'd like to find a market for this book to be published after much revision and development. But at this time, no contracts have or will be signed, and it's not possible to determine any possible income derived from publication in the future.

4. How this Project Connects with College's Mission Statement:

My sabbatical proposal promotes activities that serve all of KVCC's initiatives in our mission statement. It means to research and contemplate ways to

- Support student goal achievement through access to learning experiences and assessment.
- Support a balance between a comprehensive curricular base and innovations in education, personal development and technology by strategically utilizing resources.
- Provide curriculum and supportive services relevant to the needs of individuals, enterprise and government.
- Maintain a learning environment built upon the inclusivity of ideas of all cultures and ethnic backgrounds.
- Support economic vitality and stability through development of a skilled local workforce.
- Integrate the components of campus-based instruction, M-TEC and the Kalamazoo Valley Museum to support student and community needs.

4. Courses taught Previous Three Academic Years and Anticipated Future Courses:

- English 110 – Composition I
- English 160 – Writing and Research
- English 223 --Creative Nonfiction
- English 230 - Women in Literature
- English 214 - Literary Interpretation
- English 207 - African American Literature
- English 220 - Creative Writing
- English 098 - Fundamentals of English I
- English 098/110 AMP

Attachments:

1. Works Collected page
2. Winter 2011 Sabbatical Report

Submitted on 22 November 2016

Discussed sabbatical proposal with Billy Reynolds, Dean of Liberal Arts.

Works Collected
(More to Come)

- Blumenstyk, Goldie. *American Education in Crisis?* 2015
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- Ravitch, Diane. *The Death of the Great American School System*. 2010.
- Rose, Mike. *Why School?* 2009.
- Siewicz, Dere. *Excellent Sheep*, 2015.
- Students of Michigan State U. *To My Professor: What College Students Really Say About Their Teachers*, 2016.
- Vance, J.D. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis*, 2016.