So You’re Going on Sabbatical? Be Sure to Take an Open Mind

Robert E. Montgomery
Department of Freshman Engineering, Purdue University

Abstract

This paper is about the process of making the transition from attempting to control everything about the sabbatical leave experience to learning to simply benefit from it, wherever, within reason, it took me. Numerous "substitutions" took place in my plans for self-renewal, with some of my original objectives becoming completely out of reach. As a result of the unplanned nature of many of my sabbatical activities, I learned a lot about things that never entered my mind when writing my sabbatical proposal. I had to coordinate my planned research project with a new faculty member at Purdue who took over the area I left behind. My planned book writing enjoyed only a small amount of painstakingly slow progress. I did not learn anything at all by auditing courses, as the ones I would like to have audited simply didn’t exist. Finally, I taught things I never in my wildest imagination would have expected to teach, on sabbatical or at any other time!

Was my sabbatical leave a failure? Far from it! Fortunately, I took my open mind with me, and I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to make a contribution by taking advantage of those openings that came my way. These included teaching an Introduction to Engineering course, a planned activity, and a Technical Communication course, an unplanned activity. Outside of teaching, my contributions to my Departmental hosts included performing a number of small studies I was asked, and able, to lend my talents to. I even did a small amount of informal career counseling for students who saw my open, approachable style as a comfortable alternative to some of the more formalized advising taking place within the system. At the end of it all, I was welcomed home with open arms by my Department Head and my Dean.

Introduction – Everything’s Planned, Right?

In a 1999 paper on sabbatical leaves in higher education¹, it was noted that such programs in U.S. higher education began at Harvard University in 1880 and spread to 178 institutions by the early 1930s. This same paper made note of "...the creative, rewarding nature of the experience; ... and its rejuvenating effects." It seemed to me when I took my sabbatical leave that most of what I had heard from colleagues and at seminars and workshops fit the same mold: sabbaticals were in widespread favor for many good reasons from the perspective of both the faculty member and the institution. Further, sabbatical leaves were taken for many reasons. Though most were taken for research or writing², a small percentage were taken for the improvement of teaching. Purdue’s policies on sabbatical leaves allowed for a sabbatical leave after seven or more years of service, with a great deal of flexibility possible with regard to the duration and timing of the leave. In my case, I qualified for a year at half salary, and that fit my plans perfectly.
The faculty handbook at a midwestern university\textsuperscript{2} stated that a faculty member "... may be granted a sabbatical leave with pay ... the object of which is to increase the individual's value to the University." Preparations for my sabbatical leave included the writing of a sabbatical proposal for the host institution and for my Dean and Department Head at Purdue. All the usual items were included: the teaching objectives, to help me become a better educator, the research objectives, to help me become a better researcher, and the learning objectives, to help me avoid becoming stale. There was even a major writing project included in the objectives – a textbook, no less – to help demonstrate, in the long run, my value as an educator on a larger scale than just to my immediate classes and students. I was clearly trying to establish that the leave would increase my value to Purdue.

Most of the smaller objectives had been carefully written to support the large project – the textbook – and were not designed to facilitate generation of a large number of papers of any sort, conference or otherwise. Further, the learning objectives were written in absence of any hard information about the opportunities that may or may not be available at any particular institution for auditing courses or otherwise learning new materials. Finally, the research objective was written around my duties, as I left them at Purdue, though I had been warned that they might not be the same when I returned.

My sabbatical proposal was given the requisite stamp of approval by all concerned at Purdue. In addition, it was used as the basis for securing the sabbatical opportunity at the host institution, San Jose State University. Their Dean of Engineering wished me luck meeting all my objectives at the start of my sabbatical year. Though the look on his face told me I could be in for a difficult time, my outlook was still one of optimism; after all, most of my objectives were centered on teaching, and I was going to be teaching. In fact, I was assigned to teaching a course in which I stood to learn a lot – it had twenty-five learning objectives. In addition, my research objectives were modest, looking only to conduct a survey of Honors Program practices relative to first-year students at engineering schools in the United States. What could possibly go wrong?

At this stage of the sabbatical year, I felt that I was in control of my activities, and that they would be well controlled and directed primarily toward meeting the aforementioned sabbatical objectives. These objectives included working on a Matlab textbook, and many of the lesser objectives were well designed to support this major effort. The highest priority of these other objectives was to teach a first-year engineering course in which Matlab was a central topic. Other objectives included learning about programming in a scripting language and doing a "state of the art" survey of practices in engineering honors programs.

My sabbatical activities were also well planned on the personal side. I had been active in both vocal and instrumental music for years, and had recently gotten back into bicycling for exercise. I had even obtained my doctor’s approval for the exercise regimen. Immediately upon getting settled in San Jose, I resumed the music activities, and it was only a short time later that I purchased a used bicycle and began riding regularly.

The Awakening
My sabbatical leave began in January, at the start of the spring semester. It seemed that, before I knew what happened, my activities were out of control. I was teaching the course that I had planned to teach. However, I was unable to learn the word “no” when it came to dealing with either students or administrators. My ages-old habit of accommodating students at whatever cost was still with me, and it meant teaching more courses or more sections than was prudent given my writing needs. It also meant doing the extras that students expect but for which they don’t necessarily give high teacher ratings.

When summer semester arrived and I still had done only minimal writing, I realized that I was going to have a hard time convincing myself, let alone others, that I had been doing all I could to put words on paper relevant to my various objectives. I began trying to figure out what had gone wrong. I thought about this for a time, and decided to make a list of all those things that got in the way of progress. Even in the face of this obvious irony, I hoped that I could overcome the impediments to my progress by making myself painfully aware of them by putting them in writing.

A quick check of where my time had gone revealed that my efforts had been placed squarely where I had intended – in teaching-related activities. Yes, I spent much time on teaching, but it went into absorbing the materials from six textbooks and on development of course materials that had received too little attention from me in the past. I found myself developing the most extensive set of lecture notes I had ever developed, for example, later converting them to html documents to place on a web site for my students. I spent time using learning styles and personality temperaments to generate teams for class projects. In addition, I forced myself to continue with my music and cycling activities, whereas in the past I had abandoned many of my personal activities anytime my work-related activities dictated.

The Reaction – Adjusting and Substituting

Academic and personal objectives were clearly being met with differing levels of success at this time, and the summer provided yet another impediment to my writing success. I was convinced, after much persuasion, to teach a technical communication course. Having never previously taught a course of this type, the preparation was intense. My other activities were already weighing heavily on my productivity, with the aforementioned use of six textbooks for the first-year course. I was also splitting time between two different churches for my singing and trombone playing, and I joined a bicycle club in order to expand my riding opportunities and to learn how to ride properly. Amazingly, at least to me, I was spending time on my writing, with bits and pieces being done on a variety of ideas. I also spent time reviewing textbooks and online materials to gain background for a prospectus for my proposed textbook.

After struggling through the technical communication course, I found myself somewhat back in control of my time, and able to choose how best to salvage some writing objectives and continue to maintain a personal life in the face of the constraints I had inadvertently placed on myself. I completed my conversion of course materials for my course web site, using the site to the advantage of both my students and myself in the fall semester. I continued my personal activities, and even added visits to several of California’s eleven hundred or so wineries to my accomplishments. Having taken the time to write down the difficulties my sabbatical presented,
I used these materials to draft three presentations on sabbatical leaves. Finally, I was able to focus on finishing my sabbatical year, cleaning up such things as reports, grades, and other deadlines. My final activities even included a critique of the course I spent the year teaching, and its “environment.”

What of my sabbatical objectives? Having decided how to spend my remaining time, I still hadn’t really focused on my original objectives to a great extent. My unwritten personal objectives were essentially met. I managed to enjoy a part of the country that I had never seen, lose some weight as a result of my bicycling activities, get better at singing and playing the trombone, and develop an appreciation for fine California wines. I also found time to show my daughter a good time on two separate visits, and spent some of the best time of our lives with my wife.

My professional objectives were not nearly so much unmet as simply substituted. I planned to write a textbook, but instead wound up “writing” a course, complete with its own website. I planned to improve my capabilities in multimedia instructional delivery, but instead learned about use of learning styles and personality temperaments in setting up project teams in undergraduate courses. I planned to do a research study on engineering honors programs, but instead wrote the survey and draft cover letter for a colleague’s follow-up. I planned to learn a scripting language or two, but instead learned about teaching of technical communication and engineering ethics. I planned to do research in my engineering disciplinary specialty, but instead critiqued an entire course and its environment. Whether or not these substitutions are completely suitable in the eyes of others remains to be seen, but two months and one sabbatical report into my return, I remain on good terms with both my Department Head and my Dean.

Reflections – What Happened?

After all was finally said and done, my sabbatical year was, at the very least, enjoyable, and from a professional standpoint, significant gains were made in my readiness to do an excellent job for my students and for Purdue University. I find myself approaching my duties more comfortably and with less of a stale feeling. I am more relaxed and patient in dealing with students. At San Jose State University, the students I left behind said many thank-yous for my teaching, faculty members expressed appreciation for my work ethic, and administrators appreciated the time I spent in adding my insight to an important first-year course. My family has forgiven me for prior whining about job burnout, and they are, for the moment, happy to have me back. I personally have a renewed vigor for writing and contributing, and am enjoying my renewed energy both professionally and personally.

I will never miss the burnout and staleness that I felt before my sabbatical leave. I will, however miss the many special people that made my sabbatical one of the best years of my life in many respects. I will miss the faculty, staff, and students of San Jose State University. I will miss the choir, and others, of Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church, and the King’s Brass of Holy Cross Lutheran Church. I will miss the Almaden Cycle Touring Club and the many rides in the South Bay Area. I will miss the climate of the Bay Area, and the many excellent wineries of California. Most of all, I will miss the special closeness of visits by family members I was temporarily separated from during the sabbatical leave.
It should be pointed out that my experience is not necessarily in line with that of most sabbatical leave-takers. In the previously cited study of sabbatical leaves at a midwestern university\(^2\), it was noted that "Of the 125 [who submitted a sabbatical report], only 18 indicated any change in activity from the expectations listed when making application." Though this is a low percentage, it would be foolhardy to go into a sabbatical leave with the attitude that success could only be measured against the original objectives. My sabbatical leave was a success by many, perhaps even most, measures. I personally feel rejuvenated in my work, and my Department Head and Dean have expressed confidence that the leave achieved positive results. However, it took an open mind to fully appreciate the benefits of the sabbatical leave and to fully realize the value of the substituted activities in which I participated. I only hope that this can be the experience of any and all who wring their hands and tear their hair out over loss of control once a sabbatical leave begins.

Bibliography

ROBERT E. MONTGOMERY
Robert E. Montgomery is an Associate Professor of Engineering in the Department of Freshman Engineering at Purdue University. He served as the Honors Program Director for over fourteen years prior to his sabbatical leave at San Jose State University beginning in January 2000. He received the BSCE from Purdue University in 1974, the MS from the University of Maryland in 1976 and the Ph.D. from Iowa State University in 1985.