

Sweetland

GAYLE MORRIS SWEETLAND WRITING CENTER

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Writing Workshop by appointment

Fall 2000

Monday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Tuesday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Wednesday
9 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
and 2:30-5 p.m.
Thursday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
Friday
9 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Evening Hours

Alice Lloyd Hall
Mondays 8-11 p.m.
Mary Markley Library
Tuesdays 8-11 p.m.

Peer Tutors

Sunday-Thursday
7 p.m. - 11 p.m.
444C Mason Hall

Online Writing and Learning (OWL)

owl@umich.edu
OR
[http://
www.lsa.umich.edu/
swc/help/
owl.html](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc/help/owl.html)

Director's Perspective

by Ejner J. Jensen

After a year as the Director of the Sweetland Writing Center, I find myself a bit dazzled by the number and range of events and activities that deserve comment in this column. I thought first of handling this abundance with the rhetorical figure called occupatio, which would allow me to mention each of these items by claiming that I had no space to consider it. In this political season, the device is familiar: "I won't pause here to speak of my opponent's venality. . . ." But it was clear that such a tactic would leave us with little more than a list and would provide my readers little information. I've chosen, therefore, to limit my discussion to four matters that seem especially timely and significant.

Hiring

The first of these topics could be seen as largely ceremonial: the introduction of a new faculty member. Our hiring of David Sheridan, however, is not a routine matter; instead, it signals an ongoing commitment to instructional technology as a central and indispensable element of our efforts in composition pedagogy. This dimension of our work, seriously under-represented over the last while, will be key in the training of writers for the classroom and workplace of the twenty-first century. David will be charged with finding ways to make instructional technology a meaningful component in the College's Advanced Writing in the Disciplines courses. At the same time, he will work with Sweetland Faculty and our peer tutors to keep them in touch with the latest additions to the technology toolbox for writing instruction.

David comes to us from Michigan State University, where he has been the technology coordinator and a graduate writing consultant for the Writing Center and where he is writing a dissertation on Detroit as an urban frontier.

Parts of that dissertation have already seen print in the pages of the *Michigan Quarterly Review*.

When David visited us last fall, those who met with him and those who heard his job talk came away greatly impressed by his range of technological skills, his command of the discipline of composition, and his ability to bring these two fields together to their mutual enrichment. We look forward to his work for our students; and we look forward, as faculty colleagues, to the opportunity to learn from him.

In hiring a colleague whose work focuses on instructional technology, the SWC is re-affirming its commitment to innovation in the writing classroom, one of its central ideals and one of the foundational values of its predecessor, the English Composition Board (ECB). The second event I want to discuss is also based on a long-term practice of the ECB, one that reflects the unit's commitment to outreach. The High School Institute, with its attention to issues involved in writing in the disciplines, brings secondary school teachers from across the state to the University of Michigan for an intensive, day-long exploration of problems, practices, and innovations in the use of composition as a means of learning.

High School Institute

This year's High School Institute, held in the Rackham Graduate School, dealt chiefly with the use of small groups in the teaching of writing (see the remarks by Stefan Senders in the accompanying special edition). Apart from the very real gains experienced by students using this method, this approach is also a considerable time-saver for the instructor, no small matter for high school teachers burdened by multiple course preparation, crowded daily schedules, and a variety of curricular and extra-curricular obligations. This year's version of the Institute was, by most accounts, a meaningful success. In the coming

year, we hope to extend our work in this area, very likely in collaboration with programs directed by our colleague Anne Gere, who holds appointments in both the Department of English Language and Literature and the School of Education.

Self-Placement

The third of the topics I want to address is both new and comfortably familiar. Directed self-placement is a new term and a new practice in an area that has long been a fundamental responsibility of the College's writing center. Placing incoming students in the appropriate writing course has never been a precise science. For many years, the ECB assigned students to First-Year Writing courses or to Practicum (our ungraded two-credit course for basic writers), or declared them exempt from the first-year requirement, on the basis of a writing sample completed during orientation. More recently, the ECB required entering students to submit a writing portfolio and made judgments about the appropriate course for individual students on the strength of a reading of that selection of work from high school classes.

Both methods – writing sample, portfolio – had serious flaws. The timed writing sample encouraged certain sorts of intellectual reductionism and glibness and didn't test well for the nuanced, reflective approach to assignments typically required in university courses. The portfolio assessment was very costly, and the submissions were finally – for a variety of reasons – incommensurable.

For the incoming class in 1999 – the class of 2003 – the SWC introduced directed self-placement. Professor Theresa Tinkle, SWC Director at the time, thought that this method would be a less costly and more intellectually responsible way of fitting students into the courses that would best prepare them for the challenges of University writing. Students were asked to respond to a series of questions regarding their reading habits and their experience as writers. Those whose replies indicated serious deficiencies were invited to consider choosing Practicum as their first writing course. In this new system, exemption from the first-year writing requirement is not an option.

This summer, in the second year of directed self-placement, we made some changes to the questions we asked, eliminating some and sharpening others. As I write, 69 new LS&A students, (1.4% of the incoming class) have chosen to enroll in Practicum. We're comfortable with this number, though we're persuaded that some students who would likely benefit from the course haven't chosen it. Of those, a good many will be identified through early assignments in first-year courses and reminded once again that Practicum is an option, though we are committed to the principle that the choice is the student's.

Anecdotal evidence from last year suggests that students who selected Practicum were more committed to the work and more enthusiastic about the class than those

who, in earlier years, had been assigned to it. We have heard no protests from students about our elimination of the exempt category, even though in some ways this element of the new system constitutes its most radical change. We are conducting ongoing studies of directed self-placement; at the end of this academic year we should be in a good position to evaluate its overall effectiveness and make further changes as they are called for. For those who want to learn more about our work in this area, Phyllis Frus has written an article about our experience with DSP that will be published in the near future. For a preview of that article, or to talk with her about the arguments it will put forward, contact her at frus@umich.edu.

Provost's Seminar

My fourth and final item in this report concerns a remarkable collaboration with another campus unit and our joint participation in an invaluable campus tradition. Over the past several years, the Center for Research and Learning and Teaching (CRLT) has organized the Provost's Seminar, a half-day session, with faculty drawn from all the Schools and Colleges, devoted to emphasizing the University's commitment to teaching. Participating in earlier Provost Seminars had persuaded me that this sort of gathering, in which faculty encounter in vivid and often memorable ways their colleagues' classroom practices, could have a wonderfully inspiring effect on all the participants. When Connie Cook (Director of CRLT) and I first talked about planning a Provost's Seminar centered on writing, I was both pleased and excited.

That Seminar – Promoting Student Learning through Writing – took place on May 1, 2000, just as the academic year drew to a close. In our planning for the day, we recognized that scheduling an ambitious and even demanding program at such a time was a risky matter. Faculty members who had just completed a rigorous academic term might have their eyes on holidays and the hammock. In the event, our fears were unfounded. Provost Nancy Cantor's energetic and challenging welcome and wide-ranging, thoughtful presentations by Jim Adams (Economics), Pat Shure (Mathematics), and John Whittier-Ferguson (English) set the pace for a fast-moving and professionally rewarding day. After the presentations, participants worked in small groups for the rest of the morning, sharing teaching strategies and syllabi, discussing writing assignments and the sequencing of assignments, and uncovering a variety of approaches to the practice called "writing to learn."

When Anne Gere brought the Seminar to a close, no one looking in on this gathering could have imagined that this was a year's-end activity. The energy in this room was all but palpable as small-group discussions continued to buzz throughout and after the closing minutes of the day's activities. I'm grateful to Provost Cantor for the occasion of the Seminar itself and to Connie Cook for her wise and

imaginative leadership of the individual sessions. But I'm especially grateful to the faculty colleagues whose spirited involvement made for such a memorable and rewarding day. I look forward to learning from them throughout this and succeeding years as they report on how they have brought the day's lessons into their own classrooms.

Announcing the 1st Annual
CALLAWAY PRIZE

The Callaway Prize of \$1,000 has been established to honor Mary Lou Callaway's memory and her life-long commitment to civic activism.

Any University of Michigan undergraduate who wishes to compete for the award may do so by submitting an original essay of eight to ten pages, double spaced, on the topic "Community Affairs in the Practice of Good Citizenship."

Application forms can be obtained at the Sweetland Writing Center and should be returned with your essay by December 10, 2000.

Sweetland Fellows Talk about Teaching Writing

The Newsletter last reported on activities of former Fellows in the Sweetland Writing Seminar in January 1999. Since then nearly two dozen advanced graduate students (Junior Fellows) and faculty members (Senior Fellows) have met weekly for a term to discuss writing theory and methods with colleagues and with guest consultants from the field of composition studies. In succeeding terms, former Fellows use these principles and practices to design new courses or revisit old ones in their teaching repertoire, with an eye to increasing students' learning through effective writing assignments.

Here we offer, in their own words, the teaching experiences of three Junior Fellows from the fall 1999 Seminar. This sampling represents the breadth and depth of knowledge about teaching writing that participants take away from the Seminar, for these accounts feature lessons applicable to many areas of writing pedagogy: the results of basing a course on student texts, the importance of designing assignments in sequence, and the inherent interdisciplinarity of writing.

Julia Carlson-Federhofer, a doctoral candidate in the English Department, taught a First-Year Seminar in Winter 2000 called "About Face."

My goal for this course was to draw together readings

and visual texts that would simultaneously stir the students' thinking and feeling and spur discussion of matters central to ideas of verbal composition. The topic of the face, a particularly affective organizational structure, was well suited to this goal. I had noted that on initial assessments, writers in introductory courses often describe themselves as fertile thinkers troubled by weak organizational skills or, conversely, as good organizers impeded by a reluctance to take risks in their thinking. A structure of organization in its own right, the face thus offered an immediate entry into technical matters that would surface throughout the semester.

Conversations with Seminar presenters and participants helped me to envision a challenging writing seminar by revising my notion of what a course could be. The term "course" came to denote a sequence of student writing activities (the texts students are producing) rather than a sequence of published models (texts written by others). This shift in orientation deepened student investment in both writing and ideas, for I began to understand that I could use texts as tools for the production of student writing and thinking without sacrificing attention to the aesthetic and ideological significance of those texts.

As a direct result, discussions began to be lively and compelling. The very first week I asked students to keep journals. In one of the first classes, after discussing Wittgenstein's unstable image, the duck-rabbit face, we read Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," a brief poem that slides between two primary images: one facial and one floral. Following an initial prompt, "What is a face and what does it do?" students wrote for five minutes. The sensitivity and gravity of the ensuing discussion, in which students either volunteered or gave synopses of their writing, surprised me. Students were more willing than I expected to offer remarks that attempted synthesis. By taking five minutes "out" for writing, we added something incalculable "in": a sense of community and intellectual commitment, and a live demonstration of their dynamic relation to the practice of writing.

My participation in the Seminar gave my English 124 course First-Year Seminar designation. Following the example of another Junior Fellow, I took advantage of this designation by applying for travel funding. Our trip to the "Van Gogh: Face to Face" exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Arts allowed students to trace, in the work of a single artist, dramatic and colorful breaks with convention in portraiture. The trip experientially affirmed the students' sense of themselves as knowledge-producers while nicely returning us to our course beginnings, the analysis of student portraits.

Curiously, had I not participated in the Seminar, I might have felt the burden of teaching the students about a master painter, as if Van Gogh were a topic to master. Instead, I approached the trip as an opportunity to cultivate a sense of ourselves as active learners and

facilitated this cultivation by helping students develop connections between what they had noticed and what we had been studying throughout the semester.

Ellen Moodie, Junior Fellow from the Department of Anthropology, had never taught a composition class before offering English 125, "Representing Violence," in Winter 2000.

Although I thought of myself as a writer as well as an anthropologist and had been a GSI in several upper-level writing courses by the time I became a Fellow, I had recently returned from two years doing fieldwork in El Salvador, and I found it a challenge to reinsert myself into academia. The seminar opened doors for me—not just teaching-writing doors but intellectual portals. As a newcomer to composition studies, I was impressed at how thought-provoking and how useful the readings in the Seminar were. I found no excess. It's empirical work, much of it based on the academicians' own experience in the classroom; yet it reaches far beyond the "helpful hints" I sometimes yearned for as I planned my own class.

Those teaching-writing doors, though, are key to non-English grad students, for we don't get much guidance on how to teach (or write, really). So it was thrilling to be able to plan a class referring to specific techniques learned in the seminar (however superficially at first). I had never used peer review, for example. While this is apparently quite common in composition classes, it is not easy. I will not say I was completely or even mostly successful, but I believe that the questions and challenges in the Sweetland seminar facilitated my first efforts and will guide my future, more experience-grounded, class plans.

The many examples of writing assignments provided in the seminar helped me in designing this course, particularly the concept of assignment sequences emphasized by Katy Gottschalk of Cornell University. I enjoyed creating different kinds of assignments to build up to a larger paper, although it was sometimes hard to convince the students that the assignments weren't separate. In fact, students *hated* some of the assignments that seminar fellows liked. Next time I'll know a little bit more about balancing my own desire for symmetry and challenge with the students' desires (and fears).

Colleen O'Brien, a graduate student in English and CRLT consultant, taught English 325, Essay Writing, in Spring 2000.

I felt the influence of the Seminar as soon as I learned that only one of the 20 students in this upper-level writing-intensive course was an English major. I immediately thought back to the Seminar's interdisciplinary discussions as I considered how to offer a course that students concentrating in economics, biology, math, and fine art would be interested in. Because of readings brought by consultants and the contributions of Senior Fellows Jim

Adams (economics), Alejandro Uribe (math), and Kathryn Tosney (biology), my sense of composition pedagogy had changed from an "English" model to one that would accommodate the needs of students from so many majors. At the same time, I wanted to be "faithful" to the humanities by giving the course a literary/historical aspect. Like Julia's, my course thus departed from the more common model, which involves reading essays by celebrated authors and writing about their ideas. Probably because my method for constructing activities in this class was student-centered, students readily agreed to do their own research at the Clements library, to collaborate on argumentative papers on topics that interested them, and to implement technology as a means of publishing their work. The form and content of essays that the students produced were as diverse as their backgrounds, as they wrote historical fiction, memoir, and essays for the Web. It was really exciting to see how much we learned from one another simply by bringing the skills and knowledge of various disciplines to the table.



FALL 2000 FELLOWS

Senior Fellows

John Swales	Linguistics
Curtis Huntington	Mathematics
Edie Goldenberg	Political Science
David Sheridan	Sweetland Writing Center

Junior Fellows

Bill Hogan	English Language and Literature
Krista Homicz	English and Education
Evanthia Diakoumakou	Linguistics
John Kang	Political Science
Matt Beckmann	Political Science
Melanie Boyd	Women's Studies and English

If you are interested in becoming a Sweetland Fellow for Fall 2001 please contact Laura Schuyler for details (schuyler@umich.edu or 936-3144).

New on the Sweetland Website

The SWC now has a collection of materials on writing and teaching pedagogy. Instructors may request single copies of these resources by visiting <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc/pedagogy/swcresources.html>