

Sweetland

GAYLE MORRIS SWEETLAND WRITING CENTER

1139 Angell Hall

764-0429

SWCinfo@
umich.edu

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc>

February 2002
Volume 5 Number 2

GILBERT WHITAKER FUND for the IMPROVEMENT OF TEACHING

by Stefan Senders

Writing Workshop by appointment Winter 2002

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.

Peer Tutors

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

Multi-Literacy Center

11 a.m - 4 p.m.
Monday - Friday
by appointment

Evening Hours

Mary Markley Library
Tuesdays 8-11 p.m.

Online Writing and Learning (OWL)

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc/help/owl.html>

In the fall of 2001, the Sweetland Writing Center received a grant from the Gilbert Whitaker Fund for the Improvement of Teaching to begin evaluating and reconfiguring the Advanced Writing in the Disciplines Program (AWDP). To start, we met with representatives from English, Psychology, Biology, and Political Science. Jennifer Widner, the undergraduate chair of Political Science, was particularly enthusiastic about the possibilities for invigorating writing instruction, and after a series of meetings during the spring of 2001, we began work with the Political Science department.

We agreed that the most important place to start was to ask a question, one which had practical relevance to the teaching of writing: what kind of students did Political Science want to produce? Did they see themselves shaping academic political scientists of the future, or were they perhaps interested in producing a kind of "politically literate citizen," capable of interpreting political rhetoric with balance and rationality? There was no single answer of course, nor did we expect one. But we felt that before we could address the success or failure of writing instruction in Political Science, we needed to know what the department was trying to achieve with it. And more importantly, we hoped that through a conversation about the department's pedagogical intentions, and in particular, about the role of writing in their pedagogy, we would learn more about how we might assist the department.

Our approach represented a departure from the way the AWDP has been structured in the past. For some years, faculty who wanted their courses to count for advanced writing credit turned to guidelines prepared by Sweetland to set their course requirements.

The requirements, framed in terms of quantities (numbers of pages, numbers of revisions, etc.) have been difficult to apply in a meaningful way, and the preparation of course approval forms had, by and large, become more of a gesture than an articulation. We thought that if departments were more involved in setting their own goals for advanced writing classes, then they would see the important role the courses could play in the educational work of the department. For example, classes could offer instruction in discipline-specific forms of writing.

Jennifer recognized the potential for the project right away, and she saw that it fit into a project the department was already working on, a survey of enrolled majors and non-majors, focusing on "academic challenge" and student engagement. She also canvassed the Political Science faculty about their visions of writing in the department's curriculum. While all faculty agreed that the "literate citizen" model was important, they also felt that their students should be able to write policy memoranda and legal briefs, and be able to present numerical, graphic, and statistical information in "graceful, clear, accurate prose." None of the department's existing courses, she realized, was systematically teaching students the skills the faculty hoped they would learn.

To assist with the courses currently being taught in Political Science, the SWC restructured its approach to GSI training in the department. Instead of requiring Political Science GSIs to attend ECB 993, the seven-week writing pedagogy seminar taken by all AWDP GSIs, we organized a series of bi-weekly meetings that lasted through the semester. The first sessions focused on writing pedagogy in general, and the remaining weeks were devoted to concerns particular to Political Science. Throughout the semester, the sessions served as an ongoing teaching circle in which we shared assignments, grading rubrics,

web resources, and literature on writing pedagogy (<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~laubenth/writing/>), with links to grammar and style handouts, web resources, and information about plagiarism.

Sweetland has been working on other fronts, too. Over the past few months, Liz Hartig, an undergraduate researcher, has interviewed GSIs from Political Science, as well as from other departments, about their teaching experiences. Our work with the AWDP, and with Political Science in particular, is only beginning. We will extend the project into other departments in the coming months, and we are convinced we are moving in the right direction. Advanced Writing in the Disciplines, often approached as a matter of mere pages and papers, is finally getting the attention it deserves. It turns out, moreover, that when departments take an interest in the Advanced Writing in the Disciplines Program as a way to improve their teaching, get better work from students, and increase the level of faculty-student engagement, it pays off.

Writing, Teaching, Teaching, Writing

by Jennifer Lutman

Jennifer Lutman delivered this talk at the Annual Sweetland Dinner this past October.

I recently heard myself telling a new class of students, on the first day, that I teach writing because I find it difficult and seriously doubt my own abilities. This spontaneous revelation surprised me as it left me. I wasn't sure what I meant, and it felt more personal than I was used to being on the first day. I'm sure I had planned to introduce myself the way I had done for years—telling the students that I teach writing because I know it's a powerful academic and professional skill. And in this I had never hesitated to empathize, out loud, with *their* difficulties; I had never pretended that I found something easy that I absolutely did not. Articulating a thesis, for example, will forever give me trouble, and I will forever admit this to them. But while I had never pretended to find writing easy, I had never claimed my struggle as the *reason* behind my choice of work.

What was behind this comment? I teach *because* I doubt? Is this true? And had I always doubted myself to the degree I was suggesting, or was this confession springing from some recent shift in my relationship to writing? I looked to my recent past. What had I been doing differently? I had just finished two years of an MFA program and written a collection of poems, and before that time had never had my own writing “workshopped”; I had only ever been workshopp-er, facilitator. Yet I wouldn't say that this experience made me doubt myself more.

Doubt differently, perhaps with more clarity and specificity, but not more.

For a better answer I looked to my teaching experiences. I had just taught *creative* writing courses—poetry and fiction—for the first time, and was still feeling somewhat conflicted about it. I'd made a mistake, perhaps, in reading Wallace Stegner's long essay, “On the Teaching of Creative Writing,” in which he seems to say, ultimately, that teachers should tell young poets and fiction writers only what they do wrong. Talent, he suggests, is there if it's there, and can be nurtured best by attention to what fails.

Not exactly in line with my pedagogy. But I heard him, and it made me uncertain how to respond when my students would worry to me about their abilities. “I'm not creative,” they'd say, “I'm not very creative.” I assumed they were confusing creativity with talent, and I'd allow—to myself—that their self-assessment in that sense might prove accurate. But what I would say aloud was something along the lines of, “Are you human? Of course. So you're creative. You couldn't have gotten dressed this morning if you weren't.” But boy, do these students resist, and their resistance didn't help me with my uneasiness about teaching them. Several of them would even slip and call their creative assignments “papers.” “It's not your ‘paper,’” I'd correct them, “it's your *story*.” I felt discouraged; I wanted them to feel pressured to work hard, to be motivated by self-doubt, but I did not want for them the same *type* of discomfort they experienced when writing, for example, a sociology or art history paper.

Why would a poem or a short story assignment feel this way to them? When I think for even a minute, I think, well, why wouldn't it? Look at what I teach them. Each word speaks a world. Each gap, each syntactic hiccup of breath, communicates. Language has rules and because rules are recognized, their violation is a form of expression, whether you mean that expression or not. And they listened. I think I was the one not hearing myself. I was the one divorcing creative writing and academic writing as though they don't share this same pressure: the pressure that comes from the inescapable truth that, as the poet Stephen Dobyns says, “[Readers] read a work presuming that *nothing* is accidental, all is purposeful.”

In this my students helped me see that despite my desire to encourage, I'd been guilty of the kind of pedagogy that scholar Mariolina Salvatori describes as elitist and exclusionary. I'd been rather willfully resisting investigation of HOW, exactly, we come to interpret or produce written work. Salvatori even calls this the “creative writing” position. I think I have been one of the teachers she describes who doesn't remember how I learned to read closely and write well, because I grew up in a house where

writing was valued, books read, poems celebrated. And because I don't remember, I don't know that I have been very self-reflexive or aware that every choice I make as a writer or reader is a choice. And I make each choice, consciously or unconsciously, from a position of relative comfort and fluency.

My students, in thinking I knew the secrets to the HOW, were making me realize that I absolutely did not. I knew only HOW NOTs. And when I recognized this, something wonderful but unsettling happened—in both my creative writing class and my composition courses. I started to see students' "bad" choices differently. I started to look at their writing in the way I asked them to think about poetry. Look at the unexpected things poetry does with words and images, I'd say. Look at how poetry asks you to step inside it. So I decided to step into their writing, to give their unexpected moments some closer attention. Places where I would normally say, "You lose me here," or "I don't follow," I re-approached. I watched where it did take me, and asked myself why.

And I don't know whether I was excited or terrified that, in doing this, I sometimes found their choices brilliant. Suddenly, almost every choice a student made seemed viable and legitimate, because if I saw each of their moves as invitations, then the onus fell on me to do the work of "getting it." And I rather liked this. I remember receiving a paper from a composition student at about this time that crystallized for me the crisis I was experiencing. One of my students had written these lines to open his essay: "There is an issue that is important. It is an issue that affects us all. The issue that is so important is the issue of rising gas prices." In my shifted state I read these lines and then read them out loud. I heard poetry. I heard his absolute clarity, his sense of purpose and certainty of emphasis, his connection of ideas through repetition. If he were writing poetry I would praise his rhythm and feel excited to work with him on lineation. I might see this as style, not a lack of skill.

And I haven't even mentioned the crisis I experienced around metaphor—that I still experience. Recently a student wrote a paper in response to Bonnie Kae Grover's essay, "Growing Up *White* in America?" In the essay, Grover asks whites to recognize that the culture of whiteness has been defined by a lack of definition, and that defining it otherwise would mean acknowledging that which many would rather ignore. My student included, in the introduction to her paper, a favorite phrase of her stepmother's: "If you get up to dance, you gotta pay the band." I was thrilled to see her focusing her summary and analysis of Grover through this lens, but as she developed the essay she slipped, in places discussing Grover's "dance" as though Grover had used the metaphor herself, or as though Grover needed to "pay" for her white privilege. I knew, from talking to this student, that she understood Grover's essay perfectly well, and yet she managed to work herself out of her own comprehension. She'd chosen a productive comparison, but she didn't

know how to tell when its usefulness had expired.

Helping this student gave me the gift of coming to fuller awareness of *my* relationship with metaphor. I, too, get confused in my comparisons. Sometimes pursuing a metaphor can bring me so deeply into a thought that I cannot write. I enter a cognitive space where language is denied access. My student's difficulty helped me understand, suddenly, why I have never assigned exercises that I found a long time ago in Peter Elbow's *Writing with Power*, in the chapter, "Metaphors for Priming the Pump." I love that chapter. One exercise: if your assignment is to write about a place, write about what kind of animal this place would be. Another exercise: if your assignment is to write about a work of art, describe this work as a medicine for a particular but fictional disease. I realize with sadness that I have never used these exercises with composition students because I'm afraid I myself couldn't do them. Not well. I know I'd be stretched and strengthened by trying, but the risk of failure feels too great.

I know I need to help such students. I need to teach the student writing about gas prices the value of an economical sentence with strong verbs: Rising gas prices affect us all. And then I need to push him to maybe say more, teach him complex sentence construction as a means of stimulating his thought. I need to teach the second student to slow down, examine her ideas more closely. But as a poet and writer, I admire them both—one for his accident, and the other for her risk—and I don't want to train any of that *out* of them. My students, in this way, begin to seem much more "creative" than I am. Granted, I know that students usually don't intend the reading pleasures they afford me—and I'd rather their choices be deliberate—but I am all of a sudden hesitant to teach them by emphasizing the expectations they *upset*.

My students particularly loved one of John Gardner's suggestions in his book *The Art of Fiction*. He says be as resistant to convention as you want, but don't wake your readers up from the dream you're creating. Their eyes lighting up to this gave me an idea. I wondered, what if I change my tactic and, instead of feigning confusion about what students are trying to say—because really, don't we usually know what our students are laboring to say?—what if we devote more attention to their writing choices than they consciously hoped to receive? What if I really enter the dream and show them my readiness and willingness to accept anything, and be excited by it? An example. The other day, a student used the word "altercation" because a thesaurus, I suspect, told him it would substitute for "controversy." What if I say to him, "So, wow, a fight happened at a specific time between particular people?" I don't want to shame him, I want him to see the power of vocabulary. "Altercation" is a great word. Let him keep it, but let him be uncomfortable in realizing that I assumed he meant what it meant. Don't tell him words have power, let him feel it, emotionally, maybe even physically, in slight discomfort.

I might tell the student who wrote about gas prices that he put me in suspense, and I *liked* it, but then I'll ask him, "Why did you want me to wait like that?" I don't know how he'll answer, but I'm betting he had no intention of making me wait. I'm banking that his first intention was only to break the silence of his blank screen. I'm trying to replace that by pretending I believe, fully, that he wrote with a different purpose.

The sad truth I have to share here is an irony. In highlighting intention for them this way, teaching writing has brought me closer to an emotional and philosophical space where, sometimes, I never want to wield a pen or strike a key again. A confession I have *not* made to my students is that the amount of writing I do decreases, proportionately, to my development as a writing teacher. I am scared of intention. I'm scared of being taken to mean what I say. So maybe my confession to my students is simply a disclaimer. Or maybe it's pride; perhaps I want to believe I am an outsider, different, someone who feels diminished or constrained by language and does not want to swing into the walk and talk.

But no, of course that's not it at all. It's that I want to walk and talk *better* and, through teaching, have become a bit overwhelmed by how many different ways there are to get there. Creativity is often defined, roughly, as the process of interacting with tradition to create new structures. And my students' new structures, albeit accidental, *are* new, and they shift my focus from the "tradition" in the definition to the looking forward, the possibilities. And then my writer's head spins. I see that if I work to unlearn my privilege as someone who grew up with books and poems, if I study the grammar of my particular fluency—and I use grammar here to mean both a system for language and a system for meaning making in general—I may see better ways to use it.

In this way I come to understand why I say that I teach writing, now, *because* it's difficult. I crave some further, deeper, relationship with the process; I want my key strokes to be more conscious, more honest attempts to connect to readers—readers who afford me a certain authority before I have even tried to earn it. I do want to continue producing poetry and prose. And teaching, more than anything, has shown me a point of entry into that deeper relationship. And so, yes, I teach writing *because* writing is difficult.

References

- Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. New York: Random House, 1984.
- Salvatori, Mariolina. "Conversations with Texts: Reading in the Teaching of Composition." *College English*. 58 (April 1996): 440-54.
- Stegner, Wallace. *On the Teaching of Creative Writing*. Hanover: UP of New England, 1988.

Dissertation Writing Assistance

by Helen Fox

A new Sweetland initiative, the Graduate Student Writing Project, is working to assess the needs of graduate student writers and expand our services to this very interesting and diverse population. Through interviews with department chairs, Sweetland faculty, and graduate students themselves, we have found that students across the disciplines need more guidance in the styles and structures of writing required in their departments; more feedback on their course papers, conference presentations, dissertations, posters, and job letters; help with basic skills such as grammar, citation, flow, and argumentation; and often, more intellectual engagement with their ideas than their advisors can or do provide.

In an attempt to meet these needs, Sweetland faculty have been offering a growing number of individual, one-hour appointments for graduate writers through our Writing Workshop. Students writing longer papers or dissertations can work with a particular faculty member weekly or they can sign up for a single appointment by calling 764-0429. We also have created a website that provides links to online explanations of the types of writing graduate students are faced with: literature reviews, summaries and abstracts, article critiques, grant proposals, annotated bibliographies, and dissertation proposals in various disciplines. Links to help with grammar, citation, scientific writing, and professional skills such as critical reading, resume and letter writing, and oral presentations are provided online also. Finally, in conjunction with Rackham, Sweetland will offer a number of group workshops on writing at the graduate level that deal with matters of style, editing, web-based research skills, and other topics. Visit our website at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc/grad/>.

Multi-Literary Center

by David Sheridan

In the age of the networked personal computer, communication increasingly takes place through digital compositions that integrate words, images, graphic design elements, and other media components. Reading and producing such texts requires multiple literacies.

The Sweetland Multi-Literacy Center offers support for students working on digital projects of various kinds, including web pages, PowerPoint presentations, and desktop-published documents. We believe that the most successful projects begin with questions like "What do I hope to communicate?" and "Who is my target audience?" rather than with questions like "How do I scan an image?" or "How do I change the color of my text?"

The emphasis at the MLC is on using digital technologies as powerful tools for communication, including visual and multimedia communication.