

Sweetland

Gayle Morris Sweetland Writing Center

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DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

by Ejner J. Jensen

Writing Workshop by appointment Winter 2001

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)

Academic life seems filled with opportunities (or requirements) for assessment and planning; and each such occasion – a new term, the end of a class, an annual ritual – encourages us to look both forward and backward. I want to engage in that Janus-like activity here, recognizing how appropriate it is at the mid-way point of my term as Director. Three topics occupy my attention: the Sweetland Seminar; the selection of Fellows for Fall term 2001; and, perhaps appropriately in this continuing political season, the state of the Sweetland Writing Center.

Sweetland Fellows Seminar

The Sweetland Seminar is the SWC's signature activity. It is, I believe, unique in bringing together graduate students and tenured faculty (and an occasional lecturer) to consider ongoing and newly emerging issues in composition. From its beginning in 1997, the Seminar has followed a similar pattern. Experts in composition studies from around the country come to Ann Arbor to meet with six to eight GSIs and half that number of faculty. While the Sweetland Seminar has multiple aims, the improvement of writing instruction in the College has been foremost and over-arching. But the design of the Seminar until this past year had served that goal only in an indirect way, using the Fellows as agents and hoping that their example and leadership would affect the use of writing in their home departments. The model, in other words, was something like trickle-down economics. In terms of their work in the Seminar, though, the Fellows were mostly

passive; they learned a great deal, and intellectually they weren't passive at all. But they were not encouraged to contribute to an agenda for their home departments or the College as a whole or otherwise assume a role in shaping the efforts of the SWC. This year, I modified the plan for the Seminar so that Fellows had greater responsibility for addressing composition-related issues in their own disciplines within the College. A comfortable grouping of interests led to the creation of three teams: in Political Science, in Composition and Technology, and in Linguistics. Each team designed a research project for its focal area and reported back to the Seminar on its findings and its plan for further work. While the results of these efforts were not transformative, they were important beginnings of projects that have great promise for effecting change.

The Political Science team, for example, (Matt Beckmann, former Dean Edie Goldenberg, and John Kang), designed a questionnaire to assess students' response to their writing instruction in upper-level political science courses. The work of the team has already generated discussion in the Political Science Department, and it will be put to good use over the next year as faculty from SWC engage representatives of the Political Science faculty in discussions about the Advanced Writing in the Disciplines Program (AWDP).

I see more changes ahead for the Seminar, some of them involving a further development of its research component, some having to do with a more focused use of our visitors' time. One area that will surely get increased attention is that of technology. I will have more to say about these matters in my next report.

On my second topic I can be brief, since the most important thing here is to introduce next years' Sweetland Fellows.

Sweetland Fellows Fall 2001

Senior Fellows

Marilyn Shatz	Psychology
Martha Vicinus	English Language and Literature
Jens Zorn	Physics

Junior Fellows

Mark Arehart	Linguistics
Theresa Braunschneider	Women's Studies
Heather Holleman	English Language and Literature
Bill Honeychurch	Anthropology
Debra Horner	Political Science
Colin R. Johnson	American Culture
Robert Rama	Asian Languages and Cultures
Noel Schiller	History of Art

I do, though, want to raise an issue of some importance. From the beginning of the Seminar, it was clear that faculty participation would be unequal among the various departments. Small units find it hard to spare teaching resources, and many faculty in our larger departments have divided responsibilities because of joint appointments and administrative assignments that make a term in the Sweetland Seminar difficult to manage. Over the next term I hope to talk with Chairs and other administrators in departments that have not participated in the Seminar, helping them see the benefits of participation.

Sweetland Writing Center Updates

Finally, a few words about the state of the Sweetland Writing Center. In recent weeks, we have enjoyed a number of opportunities for deserved self-congratulation. We awarded the first Callaway Prize, an award for the best essay on a topic related to community service. Sponsored by David and Joan Marshall and named for long-time community activist Mary Lou Callaway, the award this year went to Todd Carmody, a senior in LSA. At the same faculty meeting at which we presented the inaugural Callaway Prize, the SWC formally accepted a \$25,000 gift in support of our Peer Tutoring Program. The donor, Rob Cook, is himself a product of the program. He spoke to us

with great passion about the value of the program and its central intellectual importance for both the tutors and the students they serve. A week after that meeting, we learned that the SWC had received from the College a grant of \$22,000 to equip a multi-literacy center. David Sheridan is the faculty person whose thoughtful planning led to this award, and we owe him our gratitude. This support from the College allows us to move ahead, reshaping our efforts to enable student writers in an environment of complex and changing forms of literacy. Writing is our business, our only business; but that simply makes it more important for us to anticipate and master its new and varied meanings.

Sweetland Hosts Conference of Michigan Writing Centers

Last October 116 writing center administrators and professional, graduate student, and peer writing tutors from more than a dozen colleges and universities gathered in Angell Hall for the annual Michigan Writing Centers Association (MWCA) Idea Exchange. Two concurrent morning sessions offered attendees a dizzying array of ten panels, workshops, and roundtable discussions to choose from. Topics ranged from "Extending Writing Center Services across Campus" (representatives from Albion College, Grand Valley SU, and Macomb CC) to "The Benefits of Team Tutoring" (UM-Flint) and "Teaching a Tutor Prep Class Online" (Saginaw Valley SU). Sweetland's Technology and Writing Specialist, David Sheridan, led a workshop on multi-literacy centers (David also designed the conference web site).

Afternoon sessions were less formal, with six different members announcing topics for the exchange of ideas—the activity that gives the conference its name. Participants at these feedback sessions shared recommendations about the importance of "a room of their own" for peer tutors, exchanged their sense of what was new in online tutoring, and debated the usefulness of specialist tutors and tutors linked to writing-in-the-disciplines courses. Afterward, University of Michigan peer tutors hosted their counterparts for "peer tutor time," while writing center staff and administrators met in the Sweetland Conference Room for the annual members' meeting.

Peer tutors participated in more than half the sessions, and they starred in some of the presentations. George Cooper, Lecturer III in Sweetland, came away extremely impressed by the quality of the ideas exchanged and the presentations. "The students I heard were on a par with those who attended last year's national peer tutoring conference and with those at other writing center conferences I have attended. We should make sure to take a large group to next year's Idea Exchange." The 2001 Idea Exchange will be hosted by Central Michigan University.

Sweetland Fellows

Talk about Teaching Writing

A Regular Feature of the Sweetland Newsletter

Each fall about a dozen faculty members (Senior Fellows) and advanced graduate students (Junior Fellows) from across the College of Literature, Science, & the Arts meet weekly in the Sweetland Writing Seminar. Together with consultants visiting from institutions like Harvard, Georgetown, and Cornell Universities, the Fellows discuss new developments in writing pedagogy. Junior fellows plan new writing-intensive courses, which they offer the following term as First-Year Seminars. Senior Fellows might design a new course or offer workshops to colleagues and graduate students in their departments, or implement strategies for writing-to-learn assignments in their undergraduate courses. The three fellows whose reports we publish in this issue participated in the Fall 1999 Seminar.

Reneé Anspach, Associate Professor of Sociology

To say that being a Sweetland Fellow was a terrific experience is an understatement, for the Seminar made me think in new ways about many different aspects of teaching writing. First of all, I realized how cursory and unhelpful my comments on student papers had been. Much of the workshop helped me become a more thoughtful reviewer of student papers and led me to rethink the pedagogical process. Jim Slevin's presentations and some of the readings (e.g., David Bartholomae's "Inventing the University") led me to think in new ways about the problems faced by student writers. Finally, after reading Joseph Williams' *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* several years ago, I had been trying out new ways of teaching writing to graduate students. Judith Swan's presentations and her work extended and deepened my thinking about academic prose. Gopen and Swan's work, as well as Williams' approach and some reading I did on my own about rhetoric, helped me prepare a presentation on writing articles, which I gave in a research seminar I was teaching that fall.

In winter 2000, I taught a seminar on proposal writing, which I had done many times before. I used some of the same ideas I developed in the fall to teach students how to argue effectively and to demonstrate the importance of their research. For the first time, students in the seminar were actually able to complete their prospectuses. In 2001-02, I plan to teach a large undergraduate course I have taught in the past, Sociology 475, as a writing course, and I will continue to draw upon the ideas I encountered in the Seminar.

Bridget Anderson, a doctoral candidate in linguistics, taught a First-Year Seminar in Winter 2000 called "American Dialectology."

When people think of "English," they usually have a

standard form of American or British English in mind. In American Dialectology, we examined the variety of ways English is actually spoken in the U.S. and the meaning of that variation in terms of ethnicity, gender, social class, and regional affiliation. In particular, we focused on African American English, Appalachian English, and Cherokee English. We also critically examined recent public debates like the Ebonics controversy and the debate over the use of Hawai'i Creole English in Hawaiian schools.

Teaching the course was very rewarding. I wanted students to be active in the field of Dialectology for a semester and to participate in the ongoing discussions about language in society. My specific goal for this course was for students to conduct original research—and report it—through a series of interconnected writing assignments. Each student researched a particular topic, and a series of assignments resulted in a data collection report, literature review, research proposal, and a "conference" paper. Course projects were as diverse as the composition of the class. One student wrote a description and analysis of Yiddish as it spoken in her New Jersey town. She interviewed several members of her family and analyzed the lexicon and grammatical system of their dialect. Another student wrote a socio-historical account of an endangered dialect in a Michigan fishing community. He analyzed an interview with a mariner within the context of the local economy (and indeed a way of life) undergoing a rapid shift. Another student conducted interviews with members of his fraternity and their girlfriends (both separately and as couples) and analyzed male discourse about sex from a feminist perspective. A student conducted a survey in her dorm designed to probe which dialects in Michigan are socially stigmatized. She found that Southern English (my own variety!) was rated least desirable, followed by African American English. Although her sample is admittedly small, her results mirror the most contemporary sociological and anthropological work addressing class, race, and ethnic conflict in the Detroit area. Many of the projects were impressive. I encouraged several students to submit abstracts to the National Conference on Undergraduate Research, and one of them took me up on it.

The most memorable aspect of my tenure as a Junior Fellow is the intellectual support I felt throughout the experience. The Seminar was a unique opportunity to examine writing (and theories and methods of teaching it) from a variety of perspectives. As Colleen O'Brien notes in the September issue, the interdisciplinary nature of writing was a focus of the Seminar, and the backgrounds and areas of specializations of the Fellows and presenters were diverse. It is exciting and inspiring that people from many different disciplines are working together to achieve a common goal of promoting student learning through writing. My horizons were considerably broadened during the Seminar, and it was invaluable in helping me to plan a successful course. In addition, a teaching circle consisting

of Junior Fellows and Ejner Jensen was a great source of support during the term I taught.

Stefan Senders, a Lecturer III in the Sweetland Writing Center and Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology, taught a First-Year Seminar, "The Ethnography of Writing," in Winter 2000.

The Sweetland Seminar served as a wonderful introduction to the study of Writing in the Disciplines here at the University of Michigan. I learned a great deal from the Seminar, although I think what I came away with wasn't necessarily what our speakers had intended. I was struck by the level of agreement shared by all the speakers: use writing to teach "content," comment with sensitivity on student papers, recognize the ways academic writing is divided along disciplinary lines. These points were and remain valid, and I don't doubt they bear repeating.

Yet, I found the level of consensus disconcerting; to me academic work has always been marked by surprise, disagreement, and (gentle) confrontation. Were we just preaching to the choir? What does such unanimity say about the scholarship of composition and writing pedagogy? I was particularly struck by the apparently shared notion that disciplines can adequately be defined by their rhetoric or genre, that disciplines in some sense *are* rhetorics. Such an idea undoubtedly gives comfort to English teachers and to teachers of writing generally (most of whom are associated with English departments), in that it suggests that English is so powerful and so broad as to be able to contain all disciplines. We seemed to be saying, "We're very good at figuring out and mastering the rules, so we can write in any disciplinary style and teach others how to do it too." But to me this position is only tenable if we believe, wrongly, I would say, that disciplines are reducible to their rhetoric.

I came away from the Seminar convinced that in our rush to acknowledge the importance of rhetoric we have overlooked a far more basic observation: that disciplines are more than their rhetorics. They are also communities of people and institutions engaged in complex and shared practices, and the members of those communities have been schooled and disciplined over long periods of time to have goals, desires, dreams, and pleasures particular to those disciplines. From this perspective, rhetoric remains significant, not because it defines disciplines, but because it is one form of practice among many. To me this distinction is important because it reminds me that writing pedagogy in general, and in Writing in the Disciplines specifically, while at a theoretical level embracing the concept of *difference*, still tends to look for *sameness*. I came away from the Seminar convinced that as we extend WID, we need to loosen the hold of English on the teaching of writing. It is surely convenient to keep writing in the domain of English; that's where it has been for a

while, and it doesn't seem that anyone else is fighting to get it, even if it does bring in money and even if it does come with its own aura and claim to centrality. But it seems to me to be ultimately destructive in that it leads us to underestimate the complexity of writing and in so far as it pushes us to deny the legitimacy of writing practices we don't understand or approve of.

If one of the goals of the Seminar is to transform the shape of disciplinary writing on a large scale, eventually we need to think more about practice and less about rhetoric, and we need to continue to open up the discussion of writing pedagogy to *practitioners* rather than *rhetoricians*. The Seminar, I'm happy to say, is already moving in that direction by including senior fellows from a variety of disciplines. In the future we will need to do more to bring speakers from other disciplines as well.

Previous Special Editions of the Sweetland Newsletter

Previous Newsletters have focused on responding to student writing, various forms of collaboration, and on peer response groups. They are available at the Sweetland website, or by requesting them from Jennifer Metsker (jmetsker@umich.edu.)

Topics of Interest to You

What topics would you like to see addressed in future Special Editions of the Sweetland newsletter?

Send your suggestions to Phyllis Frus (frus@umich.edu) or Laura Schuyler (schuyler@umich.edu).