

Sweetland

GAYLE MORRIS SWEETLAND WRITING CENTER

September 2001
Volume 5 Number 1

1139 Angell Hall
764-0429
SWCinfo@
umich.edu
<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc>

DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

by Ejner J. Jensen

Writing Workshop by appointment

Fall 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)

As I look forward to the third year of my term as Director of the Sweetland Writing Center, I have a keen sense of time's swift passing and a correspondingly keen sense of work in progress that needs to be moved ahead and, in some cases, brought to completion. At the same time, I'm aware that new challenges and new projects arise on a regular basis, offering significant opportunities but also suggesting new levies on our limited resources. In what follows, then, I want to comment on the current situation in the SWC. My aim is to provide an update on continuing projects and describe planned and prospective new ventures. First, though, I want to introduce the new additions to our faculty and staff.

I once described the role of Associate Director in the Department of English Language and Literature as being "the Department's vacuum cleaner." By that self-deprecating account—I held the position I was describing—I meant that the Associate Chair has responsibilities for tidying up after others, tending to mundane and even menial details, and helping the Department in ways that focus on the nitty and the gritty. When Caroline Eisner agreed last Spring to join the SWC—she took up her role on August 20—I made it clear to her that the position was not so limited and mechanical. The Associate Director is key to the effective functioning of the SWC; for the position entails not only attending to the day-to-day work of the Center but also long-range planning,

management of essential programs and services, and collaboration with the Director in every aspect of the unit's work.

Caroline is well prepared for such a varied and demanding role. She comes to us from Georgetown University, where she was Director of their Writing Center. Her extensive responsibilities there included directing the undergraduate writing tutor program and involvement in the community service learning program. She continues in her role as Associate Director of the Visible Knowledge Project, which is focused on student learning and faculty development in technology-enhanced learning environments, and she continues as well to serve as a consultant to the Academy of American Poets, the Council of the Great City Schools and the Bread Loaf School of English. In the short while she has been with the SWC, Caroline has already begun to make a difference. She brings to her work an active and searching imagination, abundant energy, and an eagerness to define and exploit new intellectual and organizational opportunities.

Caroline holds a position in the P&A (Professional and Administrative) category as a Program Manager; she is also a Lecturer III. Our second new Lecturer III is Charlotte Pagni, who is completing her Ph.D. work in Michigan's American Culture Program. Charlotte is a former Sweetland Junior Fellow. She brings to the SWC a strong background in the social sciences and extensive teaching experience. We will be counting on her for significant support in the Advanced Writing in the Disciplines Program.

In addition to Caroline and Charlotte, a number of new Lecturer Is have joined the SWC this year. They include the following: Nicholas Harp, Lizzie Hutton, Patrick O’Keeffe, John Ponyicsanyi, and Jess Row. Finally, we have a new receptionist. Elise Frankish, who joined us in August, is a graduate of the College. We are delighted to have her in this role, in which she is often the first contact students and others (faculty, visitors) have with the Center.

We begin the sixth Sweetland Seminar this fall with a talented group of Junior and Senior Fellows drawn from a variety of Departments. Senior Fellows Marilyn Shatz (Linguistics and Psychology), Martha Vicinus (English and Women’s Studies), and Jens Zorn (Physics), are joined by Mark Arehart (Linguistics), Theresa Braunschneider (Women’s Studies), Cari Carpenter (Women’s Studies), John F. Collins (Anthropology), Michael Hanmer (Political Science), Heather Holleman (English), Debra Horner (Political Science), Noël Schiller (History of Art). Visiting scholars for this term include many colleagues who have been part of the Seminar in earlier years: Katie Gottschalk (Cornell University), James Slevin (Georgetown University), Judith Swan (Princeton University), Keith Hjortshoj (Cornell University). Rosa Eberly (University of Texas, here for the first time) will give a public talk on Thursday, October 18 at 4:00 p.m. Her visit is part of a developing effort to share the work of the Seminar and its visitors with the larger community of those interested in writing.

Finally, I want to say a word or two about ongoing projects. Helen Fox continues to explore varied means of providing encouragement and assistance to graduate students who have reached the dissertation stage and find themselves struggling with their writing. Stefan Senders and I are working with four Departments in the College—Biology, English, Political Science and Psychology—to shape Upper-Level Writing Requirement (ULWR) courses to more compellingly reflect the goals of their Departments. The multi-literacy center, to be overseen by David Sheridan, continues to take shape, though at this writing we are struggling to find appropriate housing for this addition to our work. Finally, planning is going forward for a conference on visual literacy that will take place in March, 2002.

I continue to be grateful for a dedicated staff and an enthusiastic and generous faculty. Together, they make the Sweetland Writing Center a place in which creativity and imagination are supported by thoughtfulness and hard work.

Sweetland Fellows Fall 2002

We will soon be sending out a request for nominations of candidates for Sweetland Fellowships to be held in the academic year 2002-2003. While we have had Fellows from a wide range of Departments, the sciences have been conspicuously underrepresented and a disproportional number of spots in the humanities have gone to GSIs in English Language and Literature. Faculty applications have been fewer than we had hoped for. If you are a faculty member and want to learn more about the Seminar, speak to Ejner Jensen or one of the faculty members on the following list:

Former Faculty Fellows

Jennifer Robertson	Anthropology
Kathryn Tosney	Biology
Michael Martin	Biology
Brian Coppola	Chemistry
Ralph Story	CSP
Jim Adams	Economics
Eileen Pollack	English
John Whittier-Ferguson	English
Michael Schoenfeldt	English
Stefan Senders	English
David Sheridan	English
Laura Downs	History
John Swales	Linguistics
Alejandro Uribe-Ahumada	Mathematics
Daniel Burns	Mathematics
Philip Hanlon	Mathematics
Curtis Huntington	Mathematics
Edie Goldenberg	Political Science
James Hilton	Psychology
Renee Anspach	Sociology
Patricia Yaeger	Womens’ Studies

***Contact the Chair of your
Department to be nominated
as a Fellow for Fall 2002.***

***Nominations due to Ejner J. Jensen
by November 9, 2002.***

Sweetland Writing Center Offers Possibilities to Expand University Composing Communities by Placing Peer Tutors in the Classroom

by Krista Homicz

Every semester writing instructors encourage students to make use of resources at the Sweetland Writing Center. An SWC faculty member usually visits classes to discuss Writing Center services that assist students in university courses across the disciplines. Yet many students fail to use the Center's services, and instructors find themselves agreeing with Alan Devenish's remark on hearing colleagues say they had sent students over to the writing center: "*Many are sent but few arrive*" (4). How, then, are we to communicate to students the value of learning to write by expanding their composing community with the help of outside collaborators?

With generous aid from the Sweetland Writing Center and Director Ejner Jensen, former Associate Director Phyllis Frus and I, a Junior Fellow, investigated this question. Our study placed experienced peer tutors (those knowledgeable about course content and trained as facilitators of the writing process) into the classroom of a first-year writing-intensive seminar and asked them to become model collaborators. We specifically wondered if adding these experienced peer tutors to the writing class would spur novice writers to seek more frequent and regular feedback on drafts of their essays, would encourage them to ask for assistance at various stages of their individual and group projects, and would have the effect of expanding the composing community beyond the classroom.

We initially piloted a project in Winter 2000 within my Short Story and Novel course to see if peer tutors could help students discuss and write critically about course reading selections. By having peer tutors who were *linked* (specific peer tutors who visited class on occasion, worked in groups with students, and scheduled appointments at students' request for outside tutoring sessions) and *specialists* (tutors knowledgeable about course content and reading selections), we saw that students began to use the Online Writing Lab (OWL) for assistance because they understood that one of these tutors would interact with them online about their papers. Here, we saw evidence that increased interaction between students and tutors familiar with course material and texts improved the overall ideas, arguments, and organization of students' papers.

In Fall 2000, we placed four tutors directly within a first-year writing and literature seminar taught by Dr. Rebecca Egger. Tutors read assigned texts, attended class, and participated in group discussions, peer critiques, and low-stakes writing assignments so as to model and scaffold a higher level of thought process and academic activity for the students. By having tutors who were not only familiar with the course content but also were regular participants in the course, we hoped to counter possible perceptions that the tutors were "little teachers" by presenting them as members of the class and as collaborators with the students, not with the faculty member.

Our study compared the experimental section of Dr. Egger's seminar with a control section in which she taught the same material to a group of students without peer tutors present. We conducted interviews with the professor and peer tutors and surveyed students midway and at semester's end about their perceptions of the peer tutors' involvement with the experimental class and their level of learning about writing and critical thinking. Further, we tracked peer tutoring sessions through evaluation sheets and session video-tapes.

Our findings, presented at the *Conference on College Composition and Communication* in April 2001, showed that students in the linked section were twice as likely to meet with peer tutors outside of class at the tutoring center than those in the control section. At midterm, 94% of students in the linked classroom reported having interacted with peer tutors, either by asking for help in class or by making appointments for a tutoring session. By the end of the term, 80% of these students had used the Peer Tutoring center in the evening for help with their drafts.

When asked how they regarded the peer tutors in their class, students replied positively, perceiving the tutors as experienced (citing words like "teacher" and "mentor") as well as helpful ("tutor" and "coach"). In response to having specialized tutors attending the class, 93% of the students expressed positive perceptions of the peer tutors' presence, knowledge, and helpfulness with comments such as these:

- "They helped tremendously to stimulate thoughts and ideas from other students, to express their own intellectual ideas, and also to challenge the members of my class."
- "The peer tutors added insights that were interesting and helpful in understanding the

readings for the class. They played an active role in helping us make revisions on our papers. Their knowledge of the text was excellent and reassured me that they would understand the argument in my paper and would be able to help me improve it.”

- “The advantage to having someone who knows what you are working on is that s/he can help you elaborate or make connections to the text. . . . A regular tutor may have trouble assessing an argument’s validity if s/he has not read the book. Our class peer tutors, however, can help our ideas and correct the structure of our papers.”

We concluded from such statements that, by having specialized peer tutors read the literature and participate in discussions, the students’ appreciation of the tutors’ knowledge was increased—possibly moving the students to seek collaboration with tutors outside of class for help with various stages of the writing process.

On their final survey comments, 94% of the experimental class felt that their writing improved because of interaction and writing conferences with peer tutors. The students in the experimental class made only minimal improvements from the teacher’s point of view. (Even with the peer tutors’ help, these students did not display gains beyond the regular, gradual improvement students almost always show during one semester—meaning their writing moved up about one letter grade.) Nevertheless, the final survey comments regarding what students learned from the tutors point to an interest and awareness about the writing process that shows 87% of them making real efforts to learn to write better. More than half the students, 61%, responded on their final survey that their *ideas* about the writing process had been influenced or changed in some way due to their interactions with the peer tutors. Even though the instructor found only the expected level of writing improvement in the experimental group, there is evidence from the students, tutors, and the instructor herself that the increased support and class morale provided by the peer tutors’ presence fostered a sense of collaboration that extended outside the classroom, thereby expanding the students’ sense of a writing community.

After conducting an informal survey of other peer tutor programs and writing centers to find examples of “linking” peer tutors with particular sections of composition courses, we discovered that our project was different from other university models: we found no

studies that assigned peer tutors to attend and participate in class meetings for the entire semester, as ours did. Our study has implications for writing centers like Sweetland in that peer tutors can effectively be linked to all kinds of courses to encourage and contribute to overall learning and growth. Courses do not have to be writing-based in order for a writing center’s services to be helpful: students can learn how to write in their discipline and gain knowledge of course content through repeated discussion and writing activities with peer tutors as model collaborators in class. By planning expanded classroom activities using peer tutors from the writing center, instructors from all disciplines can involve peer tutors in their courses and curricula. Instructors might obtain grants to fund peer tutors or investigate ways to assign university credit for their course involvement. Even one or two tutors attached to a course would be sufficient to provide assistance to students. Our instructor said that the study could have achieved similar effects with fewer peer tutors, or even more positive effects, because just one or two tutors might feel more personally responsible for guiding students through the work at hand. In further research, we would like to follow up with members of the experimental class to see if they are still thinking about the writing process as a collaborative act as they produce other written work for college courses. This study opens yet another area of collaboration between Sweetland and university colleagues that we hope will be pursued in future research and in practice.

Works Cited

Devenish, Alan. “Decentering the Writing Center.” *The Writing Lab Newsletter*.
September 1983: 4-7.

•

CALLAWAY Undergraduate Writing Prize

Original essays of eight to ten pages, double spaced, on the topic, “Community Affairs in the Practice of Good Citizenship” should be submitted by December 7, 2001 to:

Professor Ejner J. Jensen
Sweetland Writing Center
1139 Angell Hall 1003

Application forms are available in Sweetland lobby or on our website - <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/swc/callaway.html>