Praxis: A Writing Center Journal (2003-2011)

From Peer Tutors to Writing Center Colleagues: The Potential of Writing Center Internships

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Internships and investment in the writing center

From Tutors to Interns

The current conversation surrounding peer writing tutor professional development frequently includes discussions of authority, autonomy, and oversight. At the **University of Michigan's Sweetland Writing Center**, our conversations have followed similar trends with the added complication of an unusual setup when it comes to one-to-one writing consultations. Because Sweetland is staffed entirely by what the field calls "professional consultants" (university writing faculty with MFA or Ph.D. degrees), "professional development" has meant simply carrying out the work of the Academy, that is, attending conferences, publishing books and articles, conducting research, and revising curriculum. Yet in the Peer Tutoring Center – a space populated by upper-level undergraduates who have completed two semesters of intensive training taught by Sweetland faculty in the theory and practice of tutoring their peers – "professional development" has raised many issues of power and authority, at least for the faculty and staff supervising them. When the "professional consultants" seek to "professionalize" the student peer tutors, the emphasis shifts from self-improvement and self-interest (in the economic sense) to quality control and consciousness-raising. The question becomes one of how to help undergraduates transition from self-interest (in the psychological sense) to community- or organizational-interest, that is, how to help them identify with the body that oversees them.

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Sweetland's mechanisms for fostering this identification beyond the training courses are innocuous enough, and are in fact enriching and empowering: tutors attend special topics seminars related to tutoring writing; receive funding to present papers at national conferences; work as class-based tutors or writing fellows, particularly in UM's Transition to College Writing course; and, most recently, vie for two summer internships. As it turns out, this is also a story of the student teaching the teacher, since the idea of offering internships came organically from a tutor in her second semester of training. The Peer Tutor Committee (a body of Sweetland faculty and staff) found the idea attractive; the internship would provide additional manpower for our summer projects and give two tutors the opportunity to take significant ownership in the center, learning what it means to work as professionals in such a place.

In retrospect, an internship seems like an obvious idea: as we work to enlist students in their own writing processes and encourage active learning, it seems logical to enlist them in the making of their own writing center, and encourage them to participate in the administrative processes of their own program and department. These multiplicities of engagement can only add to the value of the peer writing tutor experience. In the **"Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice"** established by the **National Survey of Student Engagement**, tutoring appears as a form of "active and collaborative learning." Those of us who work with and train peer tutors know that it also ranks high in "student-faculty interaction." Internships, on the other hand, count as "enriching educational experiences" that allow students to "integrate, synthesize, and apply knowledge." Through weekly meetings and full collaboration on a range of complex tasks, our internship model ratcheted student-faculty-staff interaction way up, resulting in significant gains on all sides.

As we reflect on the summer and look ahead to the internship applications that will begin to arrive next March, we believe we have hit on something unexpected and exciting, and it is this story we and our interns wish to tell.

The Interns' Tale

As two self-described "Language Nuancers" and the first pair of peer tutors to become interns at the Sweetland Writing Center, we found ourselves spending a good deal of time debating the minutiae of sentence structure, phrases, and even single words. Our two main projects required all our nuancing abilities as each focused on applying and expanding the cohesive public image Sweetland has worked to develop throughout the UM community. The first was a website update-turned-redesign that involved improving navigability to better serve Sweetland's current audience and attract new users. Similarly, through the development of a synchronous OWL pilot – **our SyncOWL** – we strove to provide a service for a previously untargeted population: undergraduates seeking the feedback typical of face-to-face tutoring but unable, uncomfortable, or uninterested to visit the writing center in person.

Throughout these revision and creation processes, we found a business-like perspective to be both pragmatic and useful. We suspect that most university personnel do not view free educational resources as a type of business. In fact, it may be that many are uncomfortable conceptualizing the work we do in these terms. Yet, Sweetland wants to be a viable presence on campus, and an important part of this goal is understanding and interfacing with our "consumers," an increasingly tech-centric group. We realize that our website is the first place most students and instructors go to understand what the Sweetland name signifies and how it can support their work within the university. Therefore, as our first form of contact with potential consumers, a user-friendly website that accurately and succinctly portrays our services and philosophy is integral to our continued (and expanded) success.

The SyncOWL takes this idea a step further by virtually connecting Sweetland (both literally and figuratively) to a largely plugged-in undergraduate population so well-trained in the uses of technology that instant online messaging and document-sharing platforms seem as intuitive as traditional face-to-face conferencing. As members of this population ourselves, we helped bridge the gap between writing center professionals and students, exposing the unique perspective our multi-faceted identities could provide. We are peer tutors, we

are interns, we are members of the larger professional writing center community and yet we remain undergrads at UM. Through belonging to each of these groups, we were able to help define the center's audiences and therefore better identify our diverse consumers' needs.

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Beginning with our first staff meeting, we were (pleasantly) surprised that a community of individuals committed to the details of writing – fellow "Language Nuancers" – existed outside of our small interns' office. In hindsight, it makes sense that Sweetland is a place where those with a passion for language and writing go to work. Prior to our internships, however, neither of us had considered higher education as a career path through which we could utilize our BAs in English and our genuine interest in words. Although now this path seems an organic extension of our experiences, our internship also helped us hone skills that will ensure our success in the professional world, whether in a writing center or elsewhere. In addition to the obvious – writing professionally, conducting ourselves appropriately, managing our time responsibly – we also improved our professional, interpersonal, and team writing skills. Like tutoring itself, these exercises in collaborative work required the ability to listen well and respond thoughtfully, establish a practical agenda, and prioritize matters based on their urgency and relative importance.

Ultimately, it was through becoming an active part of Sweetland's professional community – no longer only peer tutors working a few hours a week – that we were able to truly engage with the place that now feels like a professional home and the community of writing center professionals who now feel like colleagues. Sweetland prepared us for and helped us better define our professional futures, and in turn (get it? intern…) we hope to have contributed to the continued success of this writing center.

From Interns to Colleagues

As we read our interns' account of their summer experience, one thing that jumps out is how the narrative itself enacts an evolution not unlike what we observed working with them this summer – a movement from being simply tutors/undergraduates to being interns/pre-professionals, until they come to occupy these positions simultaneously by the end of the summer. The conversations they describe sound like tutor talk – the kind of collaborative negotiating of words and meanings that happens in every good tutoring session. Indeed, it is precisely that interest in "language nuancing" that both led to and grew out of their becoming peer tutors in writing at UM. But by the end of their narrative, our interns evince not only a tutor's delight in the nuances of written language but also a deeper understanding of the broader mission of our writing center, as well as a sense of empowered belonging to and identification with a community of scholars and professionals – something still relatively rare in the undergraduate experience.

The research is clear that peer tutoring in writing benefits the tutors as much as the tutees, and that those benefits extend far beyond graduation or even the first post-college job. The wonderful testimonials reproduced on the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project website attest to the powerful abilities tutors take into the workplace and their personal lives: powers of problem-

solving; flexibility and adaptability; meta-communication; sensitivity to process, purpose, and audience; and an ability to glean the larger structure and hierarchize the smaller parts. Our interns brought these abilities to their position, but also grew them in spades as their engagement deepened. By the end of the summer, we felt fully at ease delegating important development projects to them, as they have described.

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They gained confidence in new media writing and in coordinating and planning highly technical assignments, skills that will only increase in value as we move further into the digital age. But beyond that, their work in new media exemplified the collaborative learning process that has been identified as a core value in peer writing tutoring. Part of this work involved researching Sweetland Writing Center history as well as software tools to digitally represent it. In gaining this broader view of writing center work – where and what it came out of, where it might be going, and what roles they might be able to play in that future – our interns began to step out of what Harvey Kail calls "the fraught but intellectually rich middle spaces between the formal curriculum, student culture, and individual learning" ("Situated") represented by tutoring, and into the equally rich (and sometimes equally fraught) space of self-determining professionalism. Little surprise, then, that our interns joked about wishing to remain the writing center's "forever interns" and opted to stay on through the fall term to complete the pilot of our synchronous OWL and assist us in our study of it. As fully equal members of the SyncOWL research team, our interns will continue their transformation from peer tutor to colleague, and in doing so, gain even broader access to workplace knowledge that in general is kept behind literal and figurative closed doors. For us, the word intern has also been transformed: from writing center worker to writing center professional, from one who performs the daily tasks of the center to one who collaborates in the planning and process work that shapes the center's identity as such.

By offering opportunities like writing center internships, we create occasions for our tutors to move beyond self-interest and gain a more holistic perspective on professional work. Our interns rose to this occasion impressively: not only did they become better-informed and more skilled as a result of our direction, it seems clear from their narrative that they also felt empowered to pursue their own creative visions and professional interests as a result of the freedom we gave them. Striking this balance will be a key measure of success for future internship programs at Sweetland. The experience of working with our interns has also helped to crystallize for us the idea that, as administrators and teachers, it is our responsibility and our privilege to support undergraduates by empowering them to take charge of their experience at the university, and by giving them opportunities to engage deeply in meaningful learning as authentic members of our community. We hope that the interns' experience of having a greater stake in their professional community will better enable them to engage and transform the future professional communities they enter – and in inaugurating and shaping Sweetland's new internship program, they are now part of the center's future as well as its history.

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Naomi Silver

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Naomi Silver is Associate Director of the **Sweetland Writing Center** and Faculty Associate in **American Culture** at the **University of Michigan**. She received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from **UC Irvine**, and has taught courses in literature and writing since 1990. Her current research focuses on literary and artistic connections between Harlem and Paris in the 1920s, and on metacognitive interventions in upper-level writing in the disciplines courses. She has recently taught courses on writing and visual culture, advanced rhetoric and research, peer tutor training, and Graduate Student Instructor training for advanced writing courses.

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Carrie Luke

Carrie Luke coordinates the **Sweetland Writing Center's Peer Tutor Program** at the **University of Michigan** — Ann Arbor, where she worked as a Peer Tutor as an undergraduate. Carrie holds a BA in English and Women's Studies from UM, and is a graduate of UM's Undergraduate Creative Writing

Program. She currently studies written communication and the teaching of writing as an MA student at **Eastern Michigan University**. Her scholarly interests include: creative writing and community engagement; teaching and tutoring with technology; gender studies; and working with developmental writers.
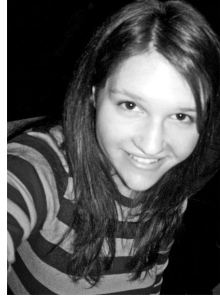
Lindsay Nieman

Lindsay Nieman will graduate from the **University of Michigan** — Ann Arbor in May of 2010 with a BA in English. She currently works for the **Sweetland Writing Center** as an Intern, Course Assistant, and Peer Tutor. While Lindsay has entertained many professional options for life after graduation, she has finally and happily settled on pursuing a career in publishing. She hopes to find new stories to share with readers, and believes her love of literature and her time at Sweetland will help achieve this ambition.

Nicole Premo

Nicole Premo is an Intern, Peer Tutor, OWL Dispatcher, and Course Assistant at the **University of Michigan's Sweetland Writing Center**. She is in her fourth and final year as an undergraduate and is working towards a BA in English, French, and Spanish. Her long-term educational and career goals include a PhD in Education and working to develop education models that serve non-traditional populations, specifically adult prisoners and the homeless.

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