Developing Writers in Higher Education

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When I became director of the Gayle Morris Sweetland Center for Writing in 2008, I knew I wanted to undertake a longitudinal study of student writers, but I had no idea that it would take nearly a decade, call upon multiple resources, and involve dozens of collaborators. Grants from the University of Michigan’s Center for Research on Learning and Teaching and Instructional Support Services supported the earliest stages of this study. Thanks to resources from the Dean’s Scholarship provided by the School of Education, funds from the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, and, especially, the endowment of the Gayle Morris Sweetland Center for Writing, a succession of graduate student research assistants helped to move this project from concept to reality.

Tim Green and Laura Aull helped to launch the essay-based Directed Self-Placement that provided a common baseline for all students. Anne Porter led an investigation of writerly efficacy; Christie Toth drew on resources from the Institute for Social Research to draft and refine our survey; Sarah Swofford and Lizzie Hutton developed the coding system for interviews; Ben Keating found and used the aptly named Site Sucker app to preserve the contents of students’ electronic portfolios; Anna Knutson wrangled coded interviews into searchable form; Ryan McCarty dove deep into students’ electronic portfolios and archived writing to create “cases” for analysis; Emily Wilson organized and tabulated data for our digital resources; and Naitnaphit Limlamai coordinated our final push into publication.

A number of other graduate students augmented this small platoon of contributors. Michael Brown, Elizabeth Mann, and Alon Yakter made statistical sense of our survey data. Sheerah Cole, Merideth Garcia, Gail Gibson, Jonathon Harris, Michelle Kwok, Chris Parsons, Molly Parsons, Melody Pugh, Emily Rainey, Aubrey Schiavone, Nicole Wilson, and Crystal VanKooten conducted interviews. Ann Burke, Merideth Garcia, Gail Gibson, James Hammond, Jonathon Harris, Stephanie Moody, Amanda Presswood, Lavelle Ridley, Aubrey Schiavone, Bonnie Tucker, Nicole Wilson, and Crystal VanKooten helped code transcripts of inter-

Throughout the coming and going of graduate students my most constant and valued collaborator was Naomi Silver, Associate Director of Sweetland. Thinking with her about virtually every aspect of this project, benefiting from her scrupulous attention to my prose, and learning from her deep knowledge of multimedia writing made this study both more effective and more fun. Naomi’s leadership in developing the curriculum for Sweetland’s Minor in Writing, her innovative approaches to teaching multimedia writing, and her enormous contributions to Sweetland’s Digital Rhetoric Collaborative created the context that made this study possible. As I step away from directing Sweetland, one of the things I’ll miss most is working daily with Naomi.

A grant from the University of Michigan’s Humanities Collaboratory for the Book Unbound project gave digital life to this study. Originally this was to have been solely a print book project, but joining forces with colleagues Charles Watkinson, Director of the University of Michigan Press; Nicola Terrenato, a professor of classical archaeology; and Matthew Solomon, a professor of screen arts and cultures, led to a successful proposal that united our study of writing with one focused on the excavation of Gabii, a city that neighbored and rivaled Rome in the first millennium BC, and another on Orson Welles’ planned but unmade film version of Heart of Darkness. Sharing ideas across disciplines as each of our projects prepared to mount scholarship and data on the Fulcrum platform emboldened many ideas, which took actual form thanks to the interventions of Kentaro Toyama, a professor in the school of information; Jeremy Morse and his colleagues in the publishing technologies group; Kevin Rennells, production editor; and Mary Francis, editorial director the Michigan publishing. These colleagues, along with very helpful anonymous reviewers and my stalwart writing group colleagues—Anne Curzan, Mary Schleppegrell, and Meg Sweeney—helped move this project to new levels of complexity and accessibility.

Of course none of this would have been possible without the generous cooperation of the students who participated in this study. Their willingness to complete lengthy surveys, participate in interviews, and regularly share their writing with us provided the materials on which this study is based. They opened windows into their learning and taught us a great deal about what writing development can mean. I cannot thank them all by name here, but their contributions are visible on every page of this book.

The authors of the chapters included in this collection shared my goal of making every contribution closely linked to all the others so that readers could experience
it in more holistic terms. This meant close readings and discussions of one another’s drafts, not just once, but multiple times. Across two summers and much of an academic year we met regularly, sometimes virtually and sometimes face to face, but always to share perceptions and make suggestions on one another’s writing. I am deeply grateful to Emily, Justine, Ben, Lizzie, Gail, Ryan, Laura, Zak, Anna, Naomi, and Sarah for the many hours they invested in building bridges across chapters.

Through the long days and even longer nights of moving this book to completion, Budge Gere sustained me with home-cooked meals, regular swimming dates, and just the right combination of space and intimacy. Denali Gere entered the fourth grade during the earliest days of this project and graduated from high school as it wound down. She kept me grounded with continual reminders of life beyond work as well as comments about my “dorky medal” (received for a teaching award) and observations about my tendency to “just start another” as soon as I finish a project. My greatest blessing is the love and laughter they bring to my life.

I owe my deepest debt of gratitude to John Sweetland for his support and friendship. A very successful business person who understood the importance of writing, John endowed the Gayle Morris Sweetland Center for Writing and, thereby, provided the resources that made a longitudinal study of this scale possible. I count his regular visits to the Center, his active interest in every detail of our work, and his advocacy for all of our projects as precious gifts.