

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 231

CS 211 217

**AUTHOR** Terchek, Mary E.  
**TITLE** Problems with Placements: What They Reveal about Writing Skills Internships.  
**PUB DATE** Mar 88  
**NOTE** 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (39th, St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988).  
**PUB TYPE** Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

**EDRS PRICE** MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
**DESCRIPTORS** College English; \*English Departments; Higher Education; Individual Development; \*Internship Programs; Professional Development; Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; \*Student Placement; Student Responsibility; \*Writing Skills  
**IDENTIFIERS** Progress Reporting; University of Maryland College Park

**ABSTRACT**

Placements in English departments' internship programs are problematic when writing opportunities lack range and/or depth, but at the same time students often have excellent internship experiences despite limited writing opportunities. An examination of the designs and assumptions of the writing skills internship program in the English Department at the University of Maryland explores these problems and experiences. The program, developed in response to the educational trend towards more vocational majors, assumed that the skills of English majors were linguistic. It requires students to spend one-third of their field work on writing-related activities. For the academic component of the internship, students write a series of technical reports, including a final evaluation of their placement, and develop a portfolio of their field and academic work. The academic integrity of the program has been insured by the way in which the assignments and portfolio allow close supervision and careful evaluation of the intern. The program is also structured to help students reach the primary goal of the internship--to assume responsibility and grow personally and professionally. This goal is fostered by having students write personal statements, part of their own applications and initial reports on goals and responsibilities, as well as on-going progress reports. This approach makes the individual student's professional growth, not the written products, central to the program. (MS)

\*\*\*\*\*  
 \* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made \*  
 \* from the original document. \*  
 \*\*\*\*\*

Problems with Placements: What They Reveal about Writing Skills Internships

Mary E. Tercnek  
The University of Maryland

Introduction

For all internship programs, placements have often caused problems. Academic supervisors who must guard the academic integrity of an internship have traditionally been concerned with the quality of the experience provided. At the same time, placements seem to determine the success of an internship as they are the repositories for the professional experience and expertise the interns seek. Placements for writing skills internships present special problems because their success has traditionally been tied to the writing opportunities provided.

Yet students often have had good, even excellent experiences in placements with limited writing opportunities. Other students have missed the learning opportunities implicit in a placement because of unfulfilled expectations concerning their writing responsibilities in a writing skills internship. Students' responses to placements have raised important questions about what constitutes a good placement and, even more fundamental, what should be the primary goal of an internship in an English Department. This paper explores these questions by examining the assumptions and the design of the Writing Skills Internship Program in the English Department at the University of Maryland.

Background: Design and Assumptions of the Program

The Writing Skills Internship Program in the English Department

at the University of Maryland has evolved over the last

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mary Tercnek

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
Office of Educational Research and Improvement  
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED294231

0111217

ERIC  
Full Text Provided by ERIC  
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

fourteen years. The original planners of the program assumed that a strong internship program would make an English major more competitive with the technical and pragmatic degree programs that dominated education in the 70's; furthermore, internships would test the English major's skills in the marketplace. These skills, it was apparently assumed, were primarily language-based. English majors study the written word; therefore, an internship designed for English majors would emphasize writing skills.

As a result of these assumptions, the current program requires students to spend one-third of their time in writing-related activities. Interns must be at least juniors, have a minimum B average, and have demonstrated writing skills. In order to maintain flexibility in placements, the program defined writing activities broadly to include research and various forms of oral communication. Interns develop portfolios of their field work which theoretically serve them in a job search. The portfolio, which includes some of the work assigned during the internship as well as representative samples of their field work, becomes the basis for the academic portion of the grade, which at 25% can raise or lower the field supervisor's assessment a full letter.

The assignments or syllabus for the internship are, perhaps, the core of the program. These assignments turn the traditional approach to internship products--the journal and final academic analysis--into a series of technical documents which allow an intern and the academic supervisor to follow the progress of the internship. Students are required with their internship application to write a personal statement describing both how the internship contributes

to their educational goals and what they will contribute to their internships. In the first weeks of the internship, the student turns in a job description and a memo of understanding addressed to and signed by the field supervisor. The student then regularly writes progress reports to the academic supervisor. The last assignment requires the student to evaluate the placement in an objective manner and to develop the portfolio previously mentioned.

### What This Program Has Addressed

The internship model described above has been effective in addressing the traditional academic concerns about internships: namely, appropriate placements with meaningful learning opportunities defined by the writing the placement entails, adequate supervision of that learning, and academic soundness in the evaluation.

The syllabus insures rigorous academic standards. The job description, if effective, clarifies for both the student and the academic supervisor what the potential for learning is in that environment. It identifies the structure and hierarchy of the organization, the variety of organizational activities, and the duties and responsibilities of the intern. A good job description allows the academic supervisor to spot potential problems, to work with the student on solving them early in the internship, and to intervene when appropriate. In the memo of understanding between the intern and the field supervisor, the intern revises the job description to work out his or her place in the organization and to contract his or her duties,

responsibilities, and learning goals for the semester. This contractual document also clarifies the field supervisor's responsibilities toward the intern's learning.

The progress reports have these two documents as their first reference, though we tell our interns they must be open to new learning opportunities. These reports should detail what tasks have been accomplished, what skills tested and enhanced, and what the student is learning. They keep the intern in close contact with the academic supervisor and allow the supervisor opportunities for spotting problems, solving them, or intervening. I should add that we also regularly visit sites to confer with field supervisors and interns; however, site visits are not as essential to supervision as the assignments.

The final evaluation is a revision of the entire semester's work. The intern must rework the job description to reflect his or her experience. The student must then step back from the internship to evaluate the placement. Interns must look at the advantages and disadvantages of the structure, the hierarchy, the work accomplished, and the skills gained to give the next semester's interns a fair evaluation of what to expect. This evaluation, along with the portfolio and the progress reports, allows the supervisor to assess the student's accomplishment for the semester. Because the portfolio provides a product which can be critically evaluated, there are no automatic A's in this internship program.

In addition to insuring academic credibility, the syllabus for the internship increases the experiential element of the internship. The written assignments help the students initially control and later reflect upon and process the learning. The

portfolio, which usually contains a revised personal statement/ resume, allows the student literally to see what the internship has meant in his or her professional development. All the assignments allow the students to explore the internship, to identify problems, to develop strategies, and to reach decisions. It is the experiential quality of the assignments which has revealed to me the full potential of the model. This revelation has occurred because of problems with placements I have been encountering in the four years I have worked with internships.

### Problems with Placements

Our English Department has sometimes had problems finding placements with suitable writing experiences. Immediately that raises the question of what are suitable writing experiences. From an academic perspective, the experience in a class should not simply allow students to practice skills already gained, but students should move forward in some way. In an internship setting, does that mean to increase skills through increasingly difficult tasks? If so, then a suitable placement is one both with variety and with new and challenging tasks for the student. We have several of those placements which have earned our department a university-wide reputation for the high quality of its internships. Ideally all our placements would be model ones.

But the placement can be the wild card in an internship program. We also have placements where in any given semester, nothing new or challenging comes along. A placement can be effective one semester for one student and ineffective the next for another. Sometimes personalities conflict or the student's immaturity

interferes with performance; but more often nothing important emerges for the intern in the natural flow of the business of that office. Still other placements traditionally have limited challenges in the writing provided, particularly in some of our legislative and business internships; yet the possibilities for acquiring other kinds of valuable humanistic experience and learning about important political/business matters are enormous.

Students' responses to these placements have been as varied as the placements. Sometimes they compare, feel cheated, and complain. Others feel their internship is trivial and develop wait-it-out strategies, convincing themselves that the learning is going on despite their frustrations. In these cases, too often the student's work has seemed equally trivial to the field supervisor, indicating that the students' attitude affects performance. (I should add parenthetically that neither midterm evaluations nor on-site visits have eliminated unexpected evaluations of students' work. Unless there is an outstanding problem, field supervisors do not often evaluate an internship until its end.) Still other interns practice the art of giving the teacher what she wants: these interns cover-up problems in order to insure they are having "A" internships. The interns who gain the most from an internship, however, seem to confront problems, working through them to a course of action which more often than not requires them to develop new attitudes towards their placements.

The interns who grew personally and professionally had, in fact, achieved the important aims of most liberal arts classes whatever writing they accomplished in their placement; while

students who limited their learning because of failed expectations, or students who mistook or misrepresented the situation failed in a fundamental way. What was striking in these latter cases, was not the poor quality of writing in their portfolios, but their lack of growth and responsibility and their lost opportunity.

### Pursuing Questions about the Assumptions

So I began asking the old questions: what should an English major seek in an internship; what should the English Department expect from an English internship; what is a suitable placement in light of these questions; what does make a good internship program? To explore answers, I have drawn not only upon my four years experience with internships, but also upon my close-to twenty years teaching liberal arts. I am also indebted to my colleagues, Carolyn Christensen, Joyce Middleton, and Peg Slafkovsky who have discussed these issues with me and shared their own solutions, now embedded in my approach.

Finally I am indebted to William Perry's work. Perry holds that students progress through stages of maturity in mastering a body of knowledge. The beginning stage puts the responsibility for knowledge on authority figures who must teach it. The intervening stages have the learner discover the relativity of knowledge and develop increasingly committed responses, ending with the learners' assuming responsibility for their actions, despite imperfect understanding. Perry's model of developmental stages in learning assumes that a goal of any class is moving the student from one stage towards the next.

A good placement does more than enhance or even expand skills.



It provides the opportunity for personal and professional growth. Such growth, however, is as much the responsibility of the student as the placement. A good internship program will push the intern towards taking responsibility not only for performing the tasks assigned in the field but also for both clarifying and achieving learning goals implicit in the placement. Personal and professional growth means assuming responsibility for one's own work and success, as well as for the success of others. It requires the student to develop stature, objectivity, and ethical responses. An internship thus shares the assumptions and goals of all liberal arts courses.

The writing skills internship program as presently designed can and often does promote personal and professional development. Again in assessing previous internships, I have come to realize that a good placement has, in large part, been dependent on the maturity of the intern. By emphasizing in their preparation for the internship and in the assignments the students' responsibility in and for their learning, I hope to increase the potential for growth in all placements. A successful internship for a mature student can be defined by his or her professional accomplishments and stature; while a successful internship for an immature student can be defined by increased levels of responsibility, adaptability, and commitment.

### Making Responsibility Central

As student responsibility becomes central to the internship program, the assignments will play an even greater role in what

the students experience and in how they experience the internship.

Two of our three programs, one with corporate business and the other with the Maryland General Assembly, have had preparatory seminars the semester preceding the internships. Workshops, one using the Myers-Briggs typology, which examines personality types and learning behavior, work on interpersonal skills, decision-making, and listening and responding. Guest speakers discuss the placement and what to expect. Writing assignments aid students in presenting themselves (the resume and personal statement), in processing information about the internships, and in rehearsing potential tasks.

In my fall seminar, I structured the seminar as an internship. Students were assigned to various groups which organized the workshops, invited the guest speakers, made assignments, and evaluated all work, including the work of the seminar. Their last assignment required the students to evaluate what they had achieved in each of their groups. Several focused on their responsibility, demonstrating a high degree of maturity and personal growth, while others clearly failed to take responsibility, blaming their failures on group processes or other extraneous sources.

Students presented the work for this seminar in portfolios which became the chief basis for their grades. But more important than the grades were the written evaluations I gave them which focused on their responsibility for the seminar's success. These comments were designed to make responsibility central to both the seminar and the internship. Thus the seminar, by increasing the experiential component in the classroom and in the final products,

became a dress rehearsal for the internship. Moreover, I have been alerted to the level of maturity and responsibility the student is bringing to the internship.

Because such preparatory seminars are luxuries, it will be more helpful to focus on our regular program which includes placements in government agencies, public relations firms, the media, advertising agencies, law offices, and businesses. We interview students on their career and learning goals and direct them to our placement files. These files include former interns' evaluations and work samples as well as materials from the placement. In the meantime, potential interns complete our application which includes their personal statement.

Students can begin to assume responsibility through these personal statements. The emphasis is on their learning goals and how the internship will contribute to these goals. They can view their personal statement as direct preparation for selecting a placement and interviewing. The academic supervisor can be helpful to the students' clarifying goals and seeing what the placement has to offer, but the students must assume the primary responsibility, both for establishing goals and for selecting a placement where those goals can be achieved.

However, it is indeed difficult, if not overwhelming, for students to know what they want before they have experienced it. Their personal statements are usually very general, and both students and supervisors should treat them as working documents. Students need to understand from the outset that they should be prepared to shift their goals as the possibilities for their

internship open up to them. Nevertheless, the more students can articulate their goals, the easier it will be for them to find a placement that matches their needs. Certainly working through the problems implied in the personal statement initiates the process of assuming responsibility. The remaining assignments allow for its development.

As I have previously implied in my description of the academic and experiential qualities of the assignments for the internship, they already serve several functions that have to do with responsibility: they allow students to define learning goals, identify problems, develop strategies, decide on courses of action. It is only an emphasis on responsibility for learning that I have clarified through my analysis of problem placements.

Learning and students' changing attitudes towards their learning should be emphasized more than accomplishments in all academic assignments. In fact, the accomplishments should gain their value from the learning contained in them. Thus their reports should detail the students' growth; and the final evaluation should evaluate the placement's potential for learning rather than its advantages and disadvantages. That evaluation, along with the student's portfolio and the progress reports, will provide a clear picture of what the student has achieved personally and professionally in the internship. Rather than focus on the written product, the academic evaluation of the student will focus on the development of the writer. In conjunction with the field supervisor's evaluation, this process should involve the student in assessing what has been achieved.

This change in emphasis should decentralize writing as the

product in a writing skills internship and make the intern central. Since this is articulated in the academic assignments rather than the field work, these assignments will have at least equal status with the field work, thus enhancing the academic as well as the experiential component of the internship.

In the long run, this emphasis will serve the student as profitably in a career search as an emphasis on writing products. A successful internship has revealed a variety of talents and areas of interest to the intern. It has allowed interns to see how effectively they operate in certain environments. It has promoted self knowledge as well as a professional understanding. What interns have learned will certainly enhance their resumes and personal statements as well as direct their career choices.

### Conclusion

The program I have examined has been developed over time by many people. It has worked well for most students and for the academic integrity of the program. As teachers work with such models, they must ask some questions about its assumptions and implementation. I think the questions raised here are important ones in understanding what we want to achieve in a writing skills internship. The fact that the program model described changes only in what is emphasized and how a successful internship is defined as my thinking has evolved shows its adaptability to a variety of responses.

My own responses have clearly assumed that internships in an English department must be as much concerned with the development of the intern as a responsible, responsive person as with

skill enhancement. A good placement, therefore, is one where students have opportunities to learn a variety of things, most especially about themselves as professionals, and to mature in the learning process. Certainly the variety and difficulty of the writing tasks available in the placement increase the learning opportunities. But they have not proven to be the crucial factors. Both interns and academic supervisors will do well to remain open to placements where writing is not paramount. A writing skills internship can effectively be defined by the academic component of the internship and the development of the writer's ethos.

Abstract: Problems with Placements:  
What they reveal about Writing Skills Internships

The success of a placement in an English department's internship program has traditionally been tied to the writing opportunities provided in the placement. Problems with placements often emerge when writing opportunities lack range and/or depth. At the same time, students often have excellent internship experiences despite limited writing opportunities. This paper examines the designs and assumptions of the writing skills internship program in the English Department at the University of Maryland in light of these problems.

The program, developed in response to the educational trend towards more vocational majors, assumed that the skills of English majors were linguistic. It requires students to spend one-third of their field work on writing-related activities.<sup>1</sup> For the academic component of the internship, students write a series of technical reports, including a final evaluation of their placement, and develop a portfolio of their field and academic work.

This program has worked well in insuring the academic integrity of the program: the assignments and portfolio allow

close supervision and careful evaluation of the intern. It also adds to the experiential component of the internship, revealing some further used when the problems with placements were analyzed. The personal statement written as part of the student's application and the student's initial report on goals and responsibilities as well as the on-going progress reports are crucial to the student's assuming responsibility and growing personally and professionally. This should be the primary goal of such an internship. Such an approach makes the student's professional growth, not the written products, central to the program.