ASSESSING THE NEED FOR A PROFESSIONAL WRITING COLLABORATIVE WORKSPACE

A WRA 491 STUDENT REPORT

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Last Revised: 12 December 2012

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to summarize findings of our study on Professional Writing collaborative workspaces, and to present potential next steps. Our goal with this project was to assess the need for a Professional Writing collaborative workspace. This report outlines our rationale for the study, our research questions and methods, our findings, our conclusions, and our recommendations for next steps—in both research and implementation.

MEMORANDUM

TO: Jeff Grabill, WRAC Department Chair; Laura Julier, Professional Writing Program Director and WRAC Associate Chair

CC: Dànielle DeVoss, WRA 491 Professor

FROM: Student Researchers Julia Fellows, Katelyn Gray, Allegra Smith

DATE: December 7, 2012

SUBJECT: Assessing the Need for a Professional Writing Collaborative Workspace

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I. INTRODUCTION

All Professional Writing courses are taught in Bessey Hall. This is both a blessing and a curse. It is convenient to have the majority of the classes for our major in one building, making it easier to travel between classes. Many of the Professional Writing faculty members have offices in the office wing of Bessey, which makes it easy for students to meet with professors after class. The fact that nearly all things PW are located in Bessey often makes students' lives easier, but the building is lacking some important amenities. There are few spots in Bessey were students can spend their time between classes—there are only a select few benches in the hallways where students can sit down and get work done, and depending on the time of day it can be difficult to find an empty classroom or computer lab to meet classmates in. Additionally, other than vending machines, there isn't any food or drink readily available in the building.

The Professional Writing program prides itself on being able to prepare its students and graduates to work in a professional environment. The courses are geared toward ensuring that students are ready to perform all of the writing tasks required of them in the workplace. Class projects are real-world applicable. A lot of the deliverables that students produce in their classwork they can use for professional portfolios.

The Professional Writing program does a fantastic job of simulating professional work and situations. It creates realistic collaborative work situations. What the program lacks, however, is a space that simulates collaborative workspaces in the professional world.

II. RESEARCH RATIONALE

We are very involved and invested in the Professional Writing program. Like many of our peers, we have gained a lot from the program. We have gained friends, peers, network

connections, and mentors. Having gained so much, we decided that we wanted to give something back to the program. We found ourselves asking "What can we do to make Professional Writing better?"

After talking with our peers, we saw a need for a workspace. Again and again, our peers expressed that they wanted a space where they could go between their classes to work on Professional Writing projects. They wanted a space that not only had all of the tools that they needed (like Adobe Dreamweaver for WRA 210 projects), but also space to work with peers in groups. We saw that there was a need for a collaborative workspace.

However, we only saw the need in talking to our immediate peers. For this project, we decided to assess the need for a Professional Writing collaborative workspace among all students in the major. We saw that before taking steps toward creating a collaborative workspace, we had to see if there was a need for such a space and whether or not the need was great enough that action seemed like a good idea.

III. PRELIMINARY LITERATURE AND EVIDENCE REVIEW

In order to refine our focus and frame our research questions, we needed to determine what made a space both creative and collaborative. We wanted to look at examples of real-world workspaces that were both innovative and functional, both in higher education and industry. The following are links to articles and blog posts that describe these types of spaces, which we reviewed in this preliminary evidence-gathering phase:

- Mashable's "15 Digital Agency Work Spaces That Evoke Creativity:" http://bitly.com/o8YCXs
- Cindi Trainor's Flickr Set "Innovative Learning Spaces:" http://bit.ly/VezjXO
- International design practice HASSELL's description of their Learning Hub project for the University of Adelaide (http://bitly.com/WbaLAv), as well as the university's own description of this space (http://www.adelaide.edu.au/hub-central/)

Examining these spaces helped us to determine which questions we were going to ask in our student survey and interviews. Since the three of us had typically worked in more traditional office settings, looking at the different technologies and spatial arrangements in digital agency workspaces helped shed light on particular aspects that we hadn't even considered. For example, screen sharing and video conferencing were emphasized in some offices, and this proved to be important for students when we surveyed them as well.

The academic workspaces highlighted in these articles and collections were typically accompanied by descriptions from the faculty and administrators who dreamt them up, the architects who created them, and the students who used them. This language was vital for us as we determined what was important not just for the completion of projects within these spaces, but also the growth and learning of the students who inhabited them. The

University of Adelaide in particular emphasized the importance of "informal learning spaces which facilitate aspects of social learning… encouraging flexible learning practices" where students "can study at their own pace, whilst also having access to the resources they require, when they require them." This description struck us as definitively PW: pairing technology and innovation with collaborative learning practices. Ultimately, we used many aspects of this university's "learning hub" space as the scaffolding for our research.

Finally, Professor Dànielle DeVoss provided us with enrollment statistics that demonstrate the Professional Writing major's growth, confirming the need for an additional space for the program. From Fall Semester 2010 to Spring Semester 2012, the major grew from 146 to 192 enrolled students—an increase of 31.5 percent. As the program grows, so should its capacity—but do PW students feel the same way? This brings us to our research questions and methods by which we determined that there is indeed a demand for this kind of space.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to make this study successful, we needed to find a way to assess whether or not there is a need for a Professional Writing collaborative workspace and to determine what makes up a collaborative workspace. It became evident early on that we could not assess the need for a PW collaborative workspace without first getting a better idea of how students define a collaborative workspace. We developed many questions that supplement our main goals.

1. How do students define a collaborative workspace?
   a. What makes the space collaborative?
   b. Which elements do students want in a collaborative workspace? (ambience, technology, etc.)
   c. What do other workspaces, both on and off campus, lack?

2. Is there a need for a Professional Writing Collaborative Workspace?
   a. Do students want a collaborative workspace?
   b. Would students actually use a collaborative workspace (and how frequently)?
   c. What would students want out of a collaborative workspace?
   d. What would students use a collaborative workspace for?
   e. Do students use other collaborative workspaces on campus, such as the Creativity Exploratory or the spaces in Wells Hall (and why or why not)?

V. RESEARCH METHODS

To answer our first research question of whether or not there is a need for a Professional Writing Collaborative Workspace, our primary method was surveying current Professional

Writing students through an 11-question Google Drive survey. Our rationale behind choosing to perform a survey rather than to lead a focus group was that between the three of us, it would've been quite difficult to find a time that we can all meet. Conducting a survey was a viable alternative to a focus group for three reasons:

1. A survey allowed us to reach a wide audience--perhaps even wider than a focus group would. We sent our survey out over the Professional Writing listserv.
2. With a survey, we were able to collect data over a longer period of time than we could with a focus group. Our survey was open one week and we sent a reminder email halfway through that period.
3. A survey, like the one we created in Google Drive, provided an easy way to analyze results.

After we have conducted our survey research, we conducted four interviews with individuals representing different demographics within the Professional Writing program. The purpose of these interviews was to ask open-ended questions and receive more insight into students' survey responses. We interviewed one senior (graduating in December 2012), one senior (graduating in May 2013), one junior, and one freshman.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

As mentioned in Section V (Research Methods), we primarily gathered our data through a brief survey that was distributed to all Professional Writing students through the PWM listserv. A notification email was sent when the survey link went live, as well as a reminder email a day before the survey closed. We gathered 69 survey responses, which means that we were able to receive data from roughly 30% of current PW undergraduates. Additionally, we conducted short interviews with four current PW students: two seniors, a junior and a freshman.

We took a variety of approaches for data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative. For simple multiple-choice questions, we used Google Drive's built-in data analysis and visualization tools. We used keyword analysis techniques for the short- and long-response survey questions that required respondents to type in their own answers. For short-response questions such as "where do you study on campus?" we tallied answers by hand and examined those numbers. Analysis for longer responses was a little less straightforward: we typically drew out key ideas and phrases from these longer sentences and paragraphs of text, and grouped these under common themes or concepts. Please see the attached appendix to this report (pages 12–13) for descriptions of both our survey and interview questions. We can also provide you with our full spreadsheet of survey data upon request: please feel free to email any or all of us (our contact information is provided on the cover sheet of this report) if you would like this information for your records.

VII. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Professional Writing students' definitions of a collaborative workspace spoke volumes about what they value not just about the places that they choose to work in, but also the types of work that they accomplish there. Students chose particular spaces to work in because they were "accessible," or "open;" they needed "technology" and "tools" or "resources" to accomplish their objectives. They also connected their work with their "learning" and "sharing." All of these qualities and more are highlighted in a word cloud that we created (see Figure 1, below) with the keywords that were present in the 69 student survey respondents' answers to our question, "how would you describe a collaborative workspace?"

These ideas were echoed by our student interviewees, who also emphasized the accessibility, openness, and creative atmosphere of these types of workspaces.

Figure 1: A word cloud that displays keywords from PW students' responses to the question "how would you describe a collaborative workspace?"

Students indicated, overwhelmingly, that they believed that the PW program needed a collaborative workspace, with only four respondents (6% of the total) indicating that they thought PW didn't need this type of space. 65 respondents, or 96%, also indicated that they would use a collaborative PW workspace—anywhere from "once or twice a month" to "whenever I'm on campus." Most often, students said that they'd visit once a week or so.

One of the main reasons why students asserted the need for a PW-specific workspace was

because the workspaces they currently used on campus didn't fit all of their needs. Figure 2 shows students' responses to the question "Where do you work on campus, if you are collaborating with a group?"
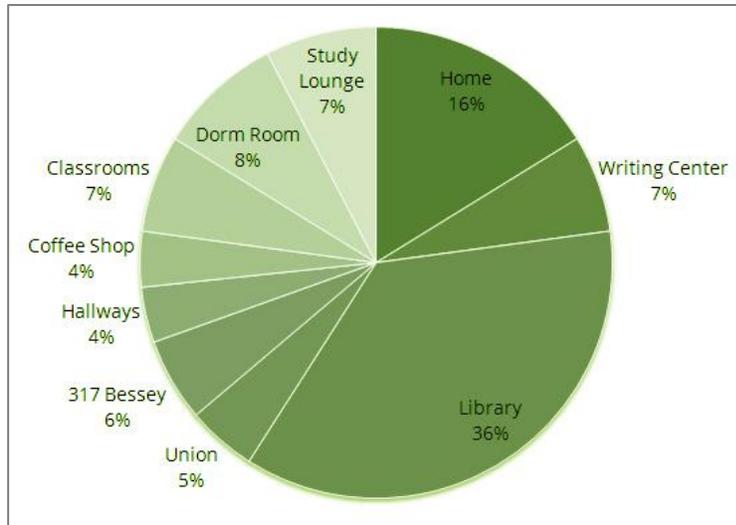

Figure 2: Data indicating where Professional Writing students prefer to complete group work.

The highest percentage of students indicated that they typically completed group work at the main library, but many of these students expressed how they would prefer to work somewhere else if they could.

The responses of our interviewees shed more light on why students felt this way. One student, currently a junior in the PW program, said that she usually worked in the library but didn't like that she couldn't leave her laptop unattended in this space, for fear of theft. She also said that she had done some research on the fourth floor of the main library, but "it's pretty cramped because the only place you can study are the carrels." In short, many current campus workspaces aren't conducive to the type of creative, collaborative work that PW students are encouraged to engage in.

Finally, these survey and interview responses describe what students really want out of this type of workspace, in terms of both technological tools and ambience. This data surprised us as researchers, because it debunked many of our assumptions about what our peers wanted in a workspace, as well as the different types of work that they wanted to accomplish in these types of spaces. Figures 3 and 4 (see next page) are charts that contain the top ten technology and ambience elements that students indicated in the Google Drive survey that they would like to see in a PW workspace.

Professional Writing means multimodal composition: not just text, but also graphics, video, sound, and more. Students requested many different technologies—most notably updated Adobe Creative Suite software, as well as audio/video editing software and equipment—that are used to create digital multimedia projects. More "traditional" elements, such as printing and whiteboards, were widely requested as well.

As far as ambience goes, students appear to want to work in a space with a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere. They don't just want couches to sprawl on while they work, but also houseplants and natural lighting. Coffee was also requested by a large number of

students, with one student interviewee stating, "I would love to have coffee in my workspace, even if it's just crappy stuff from a vending machine."

Figure 3: Students' top ten most wanted collaborative workspace technologies

Technology element	Number of students (% of respondents)
Color Printing	63 (91%)
Black and White Printing	59 (86%)
Macs	58 (84%)
Whiteboards	58 (84%)
Updated Adobe Creative Suite Software	54 (78%)
Video Recording/Editing Equipment and Software	48 (70%)
Audio Recording/Editing Equipment and Software	44 (64%)
PCs	42 (61%)
Accessible Screen Sharing/Connectivity	42 (61%)
Flat Panel Screens (e.g. smartboards, projection screens)	33 (48%)

Figure 4: Students' top ten most wanted collaborative workspace ambience elements

Ambience element	Number of students (% of respondents)
Many Power Outlets	66 (96%)
Natural Lighting	60 (87%)
Water	55 (80%)
Breakout Spaces (e.g. furniture to help divide the space such as divider screens)	53 (77%)
Couches	52 (75%)
Plants	50 (72%)
Painted Walls	46 (67%)
Individual Workspaces	46 (67%)
Coffee	46 (67%)
Modular Furniture	45 (65%)

VIII. POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS: WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN FOR PROFESSIONAL WRITING AT MICHIGAN STATE?

This research project is a pilot study, intended to guide future research into the topic. We looked at just one group of people who would be affected by the creation of a Professional Writing collaborative workspace. It is recommended that further steps be taken before planning and implementation of a Professional Writing collaborative workspace.

Our goal with this project was simple: to assess the need for Professional Writing collaborative workspace, but our results revealed more than that. Not only did we find that students think that there is a need for a collaborative workspace, but 94% of surveyed students said that they would use one. These students would use a space for a wide variety of projects as well, articulating their needs for both individual and group workspaces, screen sharing capabilities, graphics editing programs, video and audio editing software and space, and more.

Something that we learned from our research that we did not consider beforehand is where students prefer to work on campus and what kind of work they do specifically when they work on campus. We learned that there are problems with current campus workspaces, but they are the best students can find at this time. Students are unsatisfied with current spaces, and either choose to continue working in on-campus spaces that aren't conducive to their productivity, or work in the comfort of their own homes. We learned about how students work and what kinds of environments they work best in. Students outlined what they wanted out of a collaborative workspace, both concerning technology and aesthetics.

Seeing these results could change the way the university plans new spaces. It gives administrators a peek into how students learn and work best. This information could help administrators design spaces with students in mind. A well-designed space has the potential to affect students' productivity and quality of work.

IX. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

According to students, there is a need for a Professional Writing collaborative workspace. Next, we should assess whether or not decision makers think that there is a need for a collaborative workspace. In addition to the questions from our student survey and interviews, the appendix to this report contains a mockup of a Professional Writing faculty survey that assesses whether or not the faculty think that there is a need for a collaborative workspace (see page 14–15). Additionally, this survey would offer an overview of the types

of collaborative projects that faculty members are assigning undergraduate students, which would in turn help us to determine what technologies are really needed in a space like this.

After assessing whether or not Professional Writing faculty think there is a need for a collaborative workspace, we would look into spaces that are currently used for this purpose. We want to determine what students like about these workspaces, and also what they think could be improved upon. Particular spaces at Michigan State that we would like to examine include:

- The Creativity Exploratory in Linton Hall
- The modular classrooms on the first floor of the new Wells Hall addition
- The new collaborative spaces in McDonel Hall

We would also look at similar spaces at other universities to see how they work. Keeping in mind that the program is trying to emulate professional situations and settings we would also study similar spaces at the kinds of companies that we are likely to work for.

Once we have done sufficient research into the need for a collaborative workspace and what a collaborative workspace needs, we would formally present our findings to the university, suggesting that they create a Professional Writing collaborative workspace. Pending approval, we would then look at funding options, potentially working with the Grant and Proposal Writing course within PW (WRA 453).

Regardless of outcome, we look forward to potentially collaborating with you on this initiative. We are passionate about the future of the Professional Writing program, and would love to see steps taken towards enriching its collaborative possibilities. As previously stated, feel free to contact any of the three of us if you have questions or concerns. Thank you for your consideration.

APPENDIX

STUDENT SURVEY QUESTIONS

Questions without answers designated were presented with text boxes for students to write in their own responses.

1. What is your year in the PW program?
    a. Freshman
    b. Sophomore
    c. Junior
    d. Senior
    e. Fifth or sixth year senior
    f. Other
2. How many Professional Writing classes have you taken?
    a. 1
    b. 2-4
    c. 5-7
    d. 7+
3. How would you describe a collaborative workspace?
4. When you work individually on campus, where do you work?
5. When you work in a group on campus, where do you work?
6. What do existing collaborative workspaces on campus lack?
7. Do you think that the PW program needs a collaborative workspace?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Other
8. Would you use a PW collaborative workspace?
    a. Yes
    b. No
9. If "yes," how often would you use a PW collaborative workspace?
10. Which technology elements would you like to see in a PW collaborative workspace? (*please check as many options as you would like*)
    a. Macs
    b. PCs
    c. Updated Adobe Creative Suite Software
    d. Premium Adobe Creative Suite Software
    e. Audio recording/editing equipment and software
    f. Audio recording space
    g. Video recording/editing equipment and software

    h. Accessible screen sharing/connectivity
    i. Flat panel screens (e.g. smartboards, projection screens)
    j. iPads
    k. Android tablets
    l. Gaming equipment (e.g. Xbox Kinect, Wii, PS3)
    m. Whiteboards
    n. B/W printing
    o. Color printing
    p. Plotter printing
    q. Other

11. Which ambience elements would you like to see in a PW collaborative workspace?
    a. Natural lighting
    b. Fluorescent lighting
    c. Incandescent lighting
    d. Plants
    e. Painted walls
    f. Chalkboard walls
    g. Modular furniture
    h. Fixed furniture
    i. Art
    j. Student work
    k. Individual workspaces
    l. Breakout spaces (e.g. furniture to help divide the space, such as divider screens)
    m. Couches
    n. Different spatial arrangements
    o. Many power outlets
    p. Vending machines
    q. Coffee
    r. Water
    s. Refrigerator
    t. other

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of work do you do on campus for your PW classes?
2. Why do you choose the workspaces that you work in on campus?
3. What are these workspaces lacking?
4. What would your ideal campus workspace look like? What elements of technology and ambience would it have?

POTENTIAL FACULTY SURVEY QUESTIONS

Questions without answers designated would be presented with text boxes for faculty to write in their own responses.

1. What is your title within the Professional Writing program? (associate professor, fixed-term faculty, etc.)
2. How many years have you taught in the Professional Writing program?
3. Please list the classes that you have taught in the last three years
4. How would you describe a collaborative workspace?
5. Do you think that the PW program needs a collaborative workspace?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Other (*please offer comments at the end of this survey*)
6. Which technologies would you like to see in a PW collaborative workspace? (*please check as many as you would like*)
    a. Macs
    b. PCs
    c. Updated Adobe Creative Suite Software
    d. Premium Adobe Creative Suite Software
    e. Audio recording/editing equipment and software
    f. Audio recording space
    g. Video recording/editing equipment and software
    h. Accessible screen sharing/connectivity
    i. Flat panel screens (e.g. smartboards, projection screens)
    j. iPads
    k. Android tablets
    l. Gaming equipment (e.g. Xbox Kinect, Wii, PS3)
    m. Whiteboards
    n. B/W printing
    o. Color printing
    p. Plotter printing
    q. Other (*please offer comments at the end of this survey*)
7. Which ambience elements would you like to see in a PW collaborative workspace?
    a. Natural lighting
    b. Fluorescent lighting
    c. Incandescent lighting
    d. Plants
    e. Painted walls
    f. Chalkboard walls
    g. Modular furniture
    h. Fixed furniture

    i.   Art
    j.   Student work
    k.   Individual workspaces
    l.   Breakout spaces (e.g. furniture to help divide the space, such as divider screens)
    m. Couches
    n.   Different spatial arrangements
    o.   Many power outlets
    p.   Vending machines
    q.   Coffee
    r.   Water
    s.   Refrigerator
    t.   Other (*please offer comments at the end of this survey*)

8. How would you like students to use a PW collaborative workspace?
9. Please offer any additional comments here