Building and sustaining undergraduate English internship programs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Experiential learning opportunities (Kolb, 1984; Simons et al., 2012), such as internships, provide valuable real-world learning experiences for undergraduate students. Internships are especially important for students majoring or specialising in writing, who can gain valuable workplace experience and build portfolio pieces from working for a company or organisation. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting social distancing measures forced internship experiences to shift to remote and hybrid opportunities. In this article, four faculty from three universities in the United States detail the ways that they pivoted their undergraduate writing internship programs to adapt to public health requirements and changing student needs between 2020–2022. We employ a user experience (UX) design framework to provide information on creating remote and hybrid internship opportunities and courses, building internship program infrastructure, integrating technology and project management tools into student internship experiences, securing funding for otherwise unpaid internships, and supporting students during their internship programs. The article concludes with future directions in writing student internships and other pre-professional experiences, as well as additional resources for internship coordinators.

Practitioner Notes

1. Build infrastructure for internship programs by collecting data from students and community partners and creating documents (e.g., templates, forms, assignments, assessments, etc.) that can be recycled from semester to semester
2. Respond to student exigences, needs, and material realities with flexibility and empathy
3. Prepare to promote student interns on campus and in your local community with physical promotional materials and brief elevator pitches at meetings, social gatherings, and university-sponsored events
4. Empower student interns through peer-review and peer support networks
5. Work with a combination of project management tools (Basecamp, Google Suite tools, Slack, and Zoom), and strategies to centralise communication between instructors, students and community/campus partners

Key Words:

English; experiential learning; infrastructure; internships; online writing instruction; professional writing; remote work

40

Introduction

Classroom teaching forms the foundation of university education for many students, but learners can benefit greatly from experiential learning opportunities, which involve concrete experiences that engage students more actively in reflection and action (Kolb, 1984; Simons et al., 2012). Internships are one prominent form of experiential learning that takes students' classroom knowledge and translates it into real-world contexts. Participating in internships affords students the opportunity to train for on-the-job, professional workforce or community-engaged scenarios while reflecting on learning, professionalisation, and receiving support from a professional mentor (the internship coordinator). As such, internship pedagogy requires both technical and practical lessons about procedural dynamics of a workplace and its culture (i.e, onboarding or training), but it must also prepare students to critically engage with multiple audiences and genres, to solve problems, to research, and to approach new situations with adaptability.

Beyond the complicated task of balancing the elements of internship pedagogy, internship coordinators must also conduct administrative labour, build community and campus internship networks, and then match, prepare, and connect students to their new internship roles. Internships are constantly changing as employers' and community partners' needs change, as students' limitations change, and as new challenges arise for students; as such, internship coordinators must be prepared to modify or adjust plans to account for unexpected changes. Just as classroom teaching shifted suddenly and dramatically with the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, so did undergraduate internships. How were students supposed to complete internship work in a time of social distancing? What internship opportunities were even available when the world shut down? How could students prepare for future careers while staying home to "stop the spread?" These questions were particularly urgent for students seeking careers in writing professions, as writing is a social and collaborative act that is honed through repeated interactions and feedback cycles.

We are four faculty who have coordinated internships for students majoring in English/writing at three different universities in the United States. In this article, we detail our experiences adapting writing internships to digital and hybrid formats during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and its aftermath. The four case studies that we present reflect how we individually applied user experience (UX) methodologies to our respective internship programs. UX methodologies have been embraced by the disciplines of writing studies and technical and professional communication (TPC) over the past decade and have thus informed the internship coordinating processes outlined in this article (see Borgman & McArdle, 2019; Crane & Cook, 2022; Greer & Harris, 2018; Masters & Fillenwarth, 2019; Moses, 2015; Pope-Ruark, 2015). Our four approaches share pedagogical underpinnings in UX, which highlights multifaceted human needs and encourages empathetic design. Designing agile pedagogy enabled us to respond to students' shifting needs, especially as they became users who were learning in unpredictable and inconsistent learning modalities during the pandemic.

Our work outlines strategies for addressing the learning and professional development needs of students during an uncertain time marked by global health crisis, social distancing, remote work, and economic decline. These interventions address both the pedagogical bases of internship

82 classes and the administrative structures of internship programs, because writing program
83 administration and teaching are inseparable in higher education contexts, and a UX approach can
84 enrich and humanise both. By telling our stories of building and sustaining internship experiences
85 for undergraduate writers during the pandemic, we provide models for coordinators of similar
86 programs both in the US and globally.

Allegra's Experience: Building an Undergraduate Internship Program in an Age of Social Distancing

89 Fresh out of graduate school in August 2021, I was hired as an Assistant Professor in the
90 Department of English at Jacksonville State University (JSU). The department had just created a
91 new professional writing concentration in its English major and minor, to help students develop
92 marketable skills in research, writing, and design. After just over a month on the job, my
93 department head approached me one morning to ask if I would be interested in building an
94 internship program for English undergraduates. I said "sure," thinking little of it, then went home
95 from campus to take a midday nap. When I awoke that afternoon, I had 30 unread messages in
96 my inbox: all emails titled that my department head had CC'd me on, reaching out to various JSU
97 offices to ask if they would be interested in creating a student internship with English.

98 The groundwork that these messages built led to 15 different internship opportunities for
99 undergraduate students majoring or minoring in English. A pilot class of five students pursued
100 English internships the following spring semester, completing 10 hours of work per week for their
101 respective community partner across the 16-week semester, in addition to building job documents
102 and professional portfolio websites through a newly redesigned English Internship class (EH 491).
103 Here's how it happened.

104 **Meet Folks Where They're At: Building Internships for a Specific Institutional Context**
105 **during COVID-19**
106 Located in the Appalachian foothills in rural Alabama, JSU primarily enrols learners from a nine-
107 county area in eastern Alabama and western Georgia. This region has a high poverty rate—as
108 such, many students are first-generation, and most receive financial aid to attend college. Neither
109 the JSU campus nor the town of Jacksonville offer public transportation services; thus, it was
110 important to build internship opportunities that were accessible on foot, to accommodate the
111 needs of on-campus students.

112 The Delta variant of the COVID-19 pandemic was dominant in Fall 2021; while JSU had ended
113 mandatory social distancing on campus and did not require vaccinations among students or staff,
114 the university continued to enforce a mandatory masking policy on campus. Thus, as I built the
115 internship program in October and November 2021, I established relationships with the various
116 campus partners that my chair had introduced me to entirely remotely, in an attempt to avoid
117 potential community transmission of the virus. These partners included staff in such units as the
118 Office of Admissions, Library, Strategic Communications, Honors College, International House,
119 and division of Student Success. After corresponding over email to determine if the unit was
120 interested in hosting an English intern and had the capacity to mentor a student in 10 hours of
121 work per week over a 16-week semester, I identified their needs that could be met by a student
122 majoring or minoring in English, and created a position description for their internship. After
123 circulating these position descriptions on the English Department student listserv and announcing

124 the opportunities in several upper-division English courses, five students pursued editorial, social
125 media, creative marketing, and communications following internships in Spring 2022. These
126 students completed 10 hours of work per week for their respective offices during the semester,
127 and met for an hour and a half on Thursday afternoons to fulfil the requirements of the EH 491
128 English Internship course.

129 **Forms, Spreadsheets, and Templates: The Critical Infrastructure for Building and**
130 **Sustaining an Internship Program**
131 Building relationships with community partners and students forms half of the process of creating
132 an undergraduate internship program. The other half is the "spadework" of administrivia: the
133 mundane, routine tasks that, while boring, provide the critical structure for such a program to run
134 from semester to semester.

135 I was fortunate to enter a context where much of this spadework had already been completed for
136 me. The English Internship course (EH 491) had already been created years before I arrived,
137 saving me the time of researching similar programs, filling out forms to propose the course, and
138 moving the proposal through various curriculum committees. My department chair had also laid
139 the groundwork for the relationships with community partners to host interns through the
140 aforementioned email chain.

141 I continued to build on this frame for the English internship program by creating template
142 documents to recycle from semester-to-semester when designing and maintaining internship
143 positions for students. These documents included…

144 ● "boilerplate" text for emails sent to prospective community partners, as well as
145 messages to the English student listserv for recruiting interns
146 ● a Google Form called the "English Internship Partner Survey," which collected
147 information from interested community partners on the type of work that they wanted an
148 intern to complete, as well as the skills they hoped an intern with their office would have
149 ● a template for internship position descriptions
150 ● a spreadsheet for tracking community partner and student contacts, as well as the
151 semester-to-semester availability of the internship positions
152 Moreover, I had to create the curricular infrastructure for EH 491: the course requirements and
153 content that would connect students' internship experiences with their classes in the English major
154 or minor, as well as build their "professional toolkits." This work included building…

155 ● the EH 491 syllabus and policies
156 ● an internship agreement template which outlined the expectations for the internship
157 experience for students, supervisors, and the EH 491 instructor and functioned like a
158 memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the semester
159 ● a learning plan worksheet for each student to fill out with their supervisor(s) to generate
160 individualised goals and tasks for the internship
161 ● midterm and final evaluation forms to be completed by internship supervisors and used
162 in calculating interns' grades
163 ● assignments for EH 491, which asked students to complete…
164 ○ weekly memos recording and reflecting on their internship work
165 ○ a résumé and cover letter (job documents)

166   ○   a digital portfolio website
167   ○   a mock job interview
168   ○   a final internship report and five-year plan

169 Building these various forms and documents ensured a clear identity for the English internship
170 program, a seamless process for both interns and their supervisors, and consistent pre-
171 professional learning experiences for students.

172 Scholars in the field of technical and professional communication have noted that, in order to be
173 sustainable, infrastructure should have four key characteristics: reflection, iteration, participation,
174 and visibility (McMullin et al., 2022). As such, I continue to reflect upon the foundation of the
175 English internship program to iterate its design, invite participation from various stakeholders
176 (e.g., students, community partners, other English faculty, university administrators, professionals
177 in industry, etc.) to refine the internship positions and EH 491 curriculum, and increase the visibility
178 of JSU's English Internship Program on campus and beyond to continue diversifying the writing
179 skills that our students develop and boost their employability in a post-pandemic age.

180 **Where to Next? Iterating the Design of an Internship Program through COVID-19 and**
181 **Beyond**
182 Iteration, as a component of sustainable infrastructure, involves "adapt[ing] to changing conditions
183 and us[ing] feedback to address gaps, inequities, and opportunities for growth" (McMullin et al.,
184 2022, p. 34). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic forced faculty across the world to adapt to rapidly
185 changing conditions, and this iteration continues even two and a half years later, as I write this.

186 Architecting internship programs is a form of learning experience design (LxD—see Grabill et al.,
187 2022, pp. 23–41) that should respond to both local and global conditions. At JSU, one such local
188 condition is students' needs for flexibility in scheduling. As many students work full time and/or
189 serve as caretakers for family members, they find it difficult to schedule classes around their
190 existing responsibilities. To address this need, I have translated the EH 491 internship class into
191 a fully online asynchronous format, so students can complete the work of the course on their own
192 time. This shift represents one example of iterative learning experience design that responds to
193 the needs of students in my particular local context. In the remaining sections of this article, my
194 colleagues at other universities describe their methods of balancing the local needs of their
195 specific groups of students with the global exigencies posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its
196 aftermath.

197 ## Jordan's Experience: Networking and Hybrid Flexibility as Assets for
198 ## Building an Internship Program

199 **Taking Advantage of Institutional Networking Infrastructure**
200 I began working at Lewis University as an assistant professor of English Studies in August of 2019
201 (one semester before the COVID-19 pandemic began). I was hired to coordinate internships for
202 undergraduate English majors and revamp the department's Technical and Professional Writing
203 Certificate. My role was designed to bolster external writing and editing internships across the
204 university and in our local Chicagoland community. The institution is a small, Roman Catholic
205 university (serving approximately 6200 students: 3,907 undergraduates and 2,276 graduates)
206 with a campus infrastructure that encourages network-building and interdisciplinary collaboration

207 among students, staff, and faculty (Lewis University Office of Institutional Research and Planning,
208 2022).

209 When I started my professorship, I networked persistently on campus to find internship
210 opportunities for students and to increase enrollment in the Technical and Professional Writing
211 (TPW) Certificate courses to generate a pool of internship candidates. The TPW Certificate
212 enrollment was crucially important to building internship opportunities because its curriculum
213 supports professional writing practice that prepares students for the real-world writing they
214 conduct in internship contexts. The TPW Certificate curriculum offers coursework related to genre
215 analysis, social media writing, digital media writing, video/podcast script writing, rhetoric for
216 writers, technical writing, usability/UX writing and research, crisis communication, editing
217 (proofreading), and professional writing.

218 Before the pandemic began, my university hosted several events to help faculty, students, and
219 staff forge connections to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. These events included daily free
220 soup and salad for faculty and staff at lunch; college-specific meetings, working groups, and
221 events where instructors could promote new classes and offerings; university-wide holiday
222 events; workshops for Writing Across the Curriculum; and new employee mission-orientation.
223 After introducing myself and sharing an elevator pitch about internships and the TPW Certificate
224 at these meetings, I handed out hard copies of promotional materials and followed up with
225 potential collaborators via email.

226 In these in-person networking situations, I also learned how different disciplines were struggling
227 with student writing, which informed how my department updated the curriculum for our TPW
228 Certificate. I cultivated relationships with colleagues in Aviation and Computer Science, and
229 began cross-listing special topics technical writing courses, and my colleagues have in turn
230 helped me promote English student internships and courses across the university. These
231 collaborations are still intact today, and my colleagues often introduce me to students and
232 potential employers who are interested in building internship partnerships.

233 Beyond engaging my colleagues, I approached potential interns as a mentor; I leveraged my
234 position as the department's faculty advisor to Sigma Tau Delta (English Honors Society) to learn
235 more about students, their career goals, and to gauge their motivation to participate in internships
236 outside my department. To recruit students for both the TPW Certificate and internships, I
237 cultivated mentoring dynamics with students from my first-year writing courses and pointed them
238 to the TPW Certificate and internship opportunities that suited their writing skills. While enrollment
239 in courses for the certification increased and the number of potential interns grew, the pandemic
240 closed our campus in March 2020 and necessitated shifts in my internship building strategy.

241 **Hybrid Flexibility & Creativity**
242 As the pandemic began, many of our on-campus offices went remote, thus prompting changes in
243 how I approached networking and building internship collaborations on campus. It was clear in
244 the early stages of remote work, both faculty and students needed technological support. To
245 respond to this need, I collaborated with Lewis' Technology Coordinator to develop five
246 remote/hybrid technical writing internships with the Office of Technology (OoT). The OoT was
247 inundated with creating support documentation for instructors who were using new technology,

248 and technical writing students were prepared to craft software documentation and manuals for
249 deploying new educational technology.

250 To help students find internships outside of school, I approached local small business owners via
251 phone and digital cold-calling. I set alerts for relevant internships and contract writing work on job-
252 finding websites and applications, such as: LinkedIn, Google Job Alerts, Lensa, Glassdoor, and
253 Indeed. I also contacted a local chapter of a professional organisation in my field, Society for
254 Technical Communication, to ask if they could inform me if they found any remote internships for
255 technical writing students. To gain more traction, I scouted opportunities for students on the
256 NextDoor app and Thumbtack app; I looked specifically for new businesses and startups that
257 were likely to need social media writing help and reached out to the owners via direct messaging
258 on the platforms. I also followed subreddits for r/content_marketing and r/technical writing and
259 responded to employers asking for contract writers. Two students were offered paid contracts to
260 submit two blog entries based on the employer's topic preferences. These approaches were
261 successful, but they were challenging in that new business owners were overwhelmed and unable
262 to communicate frequently with students about their needs.

263 As my internship coordinating continued through the pandemic in a hybrid model, I started
264 learning more about the infrastructure I needed to build within my department to help students
265 with internship work. After a few semesters of pandemic learning and adopting Borgman and
266 McArdle's PARS (2019) approach, I decided to create a Microsoft Teams site where students
267 could share their resumes and cover letters for feedback, look at the latest internship postings I
268 shared, message me to set up mock interviews, and to contact me quickly for guidance on writing,
269 labour, or professional questions. In this space, I offered personal, accessible, responsive and
270 strategic (PARS) pedagogy while dynamically engaging with students on a platform professional
271 writers use for hybrid and remote collaboration. Teams had the added benefit of engaging
272 students as users, which lent to practical professionalisation lessons and technological agility
273 (Greer & Harris, 2018).

274 To streamline these necessary collaborations with students, I realised I needed to develop an
275 internship course to centralise my labour and create student cohorts to support peer-review and
276 shared learning. Next semester, I'm piloting a series of writing workshops (Internship Readiness;
277 Career Readiness; Professional Presence & Interview Preparation), designed to prepare students
278 for developing successful professional strategies before they work with community partners.
279 These hybrid courses are one-credit hour for 8-weeks, and students develop skills for finding and
280 applying to internships, developing professional portfolios, and preparing for interviews.

281 Though the pandemic has eased, students at Lewis experienced COVID-19 in ways that
282 significantly impacted their material realities and inhibited many of them from taking on additional
283 labour outside of their coursework. During the pandemic, students remarked that their challenges
284 related to burnout from heavy online course loads, family care-taking responsibilities, demanding
285 part-time jobs, anxiety and fear about contracting COVID-19, email overload, grieving those who
286 were lost to COVID-19, transportation issues, and most notably, financial duress. These
287 challenges continue to reverberate after the pandemic, as students begin recovering from the
288 financial and mental health consequences they have endured.

289 ***Adjusting to Post-Pandemic Student Needs***

290 Now that students and faculty have returned to campus, I am combining strategies of on-campus
291 networking while also searching for remote work for students. The pandemic changed students'
292 labour preferences, as they largely request remote or hybrid work for internships now. For
293 example, I negotiated with an operations manager at a local gym (for three months) to get
294 students a stipend and gas reimbursement for their labour as a social media writing intern (hybrid),
295 but all current interns wanted hybrid on-campus internships or fully remote and paid positions off
296 campus.

297 Thereafter, I ran a more targeted search through my campus directory when I realised students
298 may need on-campus internships while they continue to financially recover from the pandemic.
299 In talking with Dr. Smith when we started writing this article, I decided to try her method of creating
300 a Google Doc for potential internship partners, and I created one for students to outline their
301 preferences and skill sets. The Google Doc method has centralised my organisational labour and
302 generated interest from multiple campus offices, and I continue to personally email department
303 heads, staff, and colleagues I meet on campus when they express needing writing help.

304 Over my time as internship coordinator both throughout the pandemic and after it, I have been
305 able to help students find a variety of paid and unpaid internships using the methods I described
306 above. The social media, professional, and technical writing internships I've developed with
307 students include work for local beauty salons, electric companies, youth-oriented non-profits, and
308 transportation companies; contract blog writing; and freelancing with online media companies. On
309 campus, students have internship opportunities with the Office of Technology, Marketing &
310 Communication, Athletic Communications, University Advancement, Alumni Outreach, and
311 internally within the English Studies department. As we move further away from the pandemic, I
312 plan to work extensively with the office of Community Engaged Learning (CEL) at my institution.
313 CEL is dedicated to connecting faculty to community partners to work within their classrooms.

314 Unlike Dr. Smith, I was lucky to have at least one
315 semester on campus in my professorial job before the
316 pandemic hit. My initial on-campus networking efforts
317 kept internships operational during the height of
318 COVID-19. I had many collaborative opportunities
319 because my institution is a teaching university that
320 promotes a Lasallian educational tradition, which
321 emphasises experiential learning and collaboration
322 with community partners to provide students with
323 "transformative experiences that are innovative and
324 holistic" and inclusive (Christian Brothers Conference,
325 2022). Thus, internships are inherently valued where
326 I work, and internship efforts are well-supported on
327 campus. Fortunately, this dedication to holistic
328 learning translated to campus-wide networking infrastructure that helped me build and sustain an
329 internship presence within my department during the instability of the pandemic.

Kate F.'s Experience: (Re)focusing on the Intern through Learning Experience Design

Pre-Pandemic: Peer Mentorship across Disciplines

Our department has supported student internships via a for-credit mentorship experience since the creation of the Professional Writing major in 2004. At the time, it was one of three possible capstone experiences. Beginning in 2018 the course (WRA 493) was merged with an internship course in the Experience Architecture major (XA 482); as a result, one faculty member taught both courses simultaneously and students in both programs supported each other as peer mentors during their internship experiences.

Prior to the pandemic, the vast majority of our students took on multiple internships during their time in our programme, while a smaller percentage (around 15 students per semester) took advantage of the professional and educational support our online internship course provided. Recent versions of the course involved six modules: the first and last around goal-setting, and the middle four a sequence of topics related to workplace skills. Reflection was key; students were tasked with writing video journals documenting and reflecting on work experiences as well as a final end-of-semester reflection about their internship as a whole.

The course also prioritised student-to-student interaction. Modules were anchored by discussion posts, where—in addition to writing an initial post—students were required to respond to the work of at least four classmates. These discussions encouraged peer-to-peer mentorship, even when online; they also built a community for the interns beyond the walls of their internship. In order for such discussion posts to be effective, however, the students were required to consider the same topics at the same time. This meant that, regardless of the professionalisation skills a student personally wished to discuss in any given week, the students discussed skills in lockstep. First, they discussed goal-setting, then communication practices, and so on. This structure worked well for students who were able to sequence their internship along a semester schedule. It was less effective if a student started an internship after the first few weeks of the class or was continuing an internship from a previous semester. Already prior to COVID-19, discussions with students in the course had led me to imagine revisions that met students' need for greater flexibility in scheduling.

Pandemic Realities: Meeting Students Where(ever) They're At

The internship course is unique in its complexities. In addition to separate-but-related learning outcomes for its two student populations (first, Professional and Public Writing and, second, Experience Architecture), it also invites in students at varying places within their internships. Some students have an internship for the entire 16-week semester, others might have an internship for only a few weeks. How does an instructor meet course goals and outcomes and give equal time and attention to each student when their experiences are so different? With the additional complexities of modality and scheduling presented by COVID-19, I quickly realised that a traditional one-size-fits-most approach to course scaffolding would not be effective. The learning experience needed to be more fully customised to the needs of each student (Greer & Harris, 2018). These needs fell into two categories: flexibility in content and flexibility in time.

370 ***Flexibility in Content***
371 Conventionally, students in our internship course would align the timing of the internship with the
372 time of their for-credit course experience. Whether teaching during an academic year semester
373 or in summer, instructors for the course could expect most students to need information according
374 to a similar timeline. The pandemic complicated this timeline; students held on to internships
375 longer and regularly scheduled internship programs often delayed their start due to issues with
376 mentor availability or outbreaks of illness. Imagine students signing up for a class they could
377 technically not engage with until week 5 because of external circumstances! As a result, at the
378 beginning of the semester some students were not yet even ready for introductory content while
379 others were looking for support on advanced topics.

380 My solution was two-fold. First, I used the existing early goal-setting assignment as a research
381 opportunity; even as students set their own goals, I identified the content they needed from me
382 and adapted later course modules to match their interests. Doing so was a strategic attempt at
383 responsive pedagogy (Borgman & McArdle, 2019): I shared with my students that I would build
384 on their interests in this way and in so doing demonstrated my care for them as learners and the
385 immediate value of our course readings and activities. Second, I added a group annotated
386 bibliography element to each discussion post: as students identified resources that spoke to their
387 needs, they also reported on those resources to their classmates. Students became active
388 participants in curating the knowledge shared in the course.

389 As I read the students' individual goals, I realised that they needed even more flexibility in content;
390 I needed to somehow address the differences in workplace environment the students were
391 experiencing. Some needed to learn about f2f workplace skills, others were entirely remote/virtual
392 and struggling to connect with their peers and mentors online. What's more, some of my students
393 were members of a large internship cohort while others were the sole employee of a new startup.
394 I felt overwhelmed with the possibilities for our course discussions. How could I meet the needs
395 of these students when their experiences were so completely unique? I required two Zoom
396 meetings (progress conferences) during the semester to offer one-on-one feedback in real time,
397 but it didn't feel like enough.

398 ***Flexibility in Time***
399 The solution to my students' content-related needs came when I considered a final variable: some
400 were, by necessity, starting late and others were finishing their internships halfway through the
401 semester. Some reported that they could not set goals because they hadn't yet met with a
402 supervisor; others wanted to dig into topics traditionally saved for later in the semester because
403 they were continuing with an internship they had begun the previous semester. Some were
404 working on-site in another state and so in a different time zone from their classmates; others were
405 working remotely and in a different time zone from their work colleagues. These students needed
406 adaptive learning schedules and flexibility around assignments. I returned to my drawing board
407 to imagine a structure in which three-credits of work could be completed asynchronously, and at
408 varying paces.

409 I re-designed the course to prioritise meeting students where and when they were ready. In the
410 newly structured course, there were seven modules: the first and final modules were goal-setting,
411 and the students could complete four of the five middle modules in any order. The table below
412 demonstrates three (of many) possible paths through the course:

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3
Module 1	Goal-Setting	Goal-Setting	Goal-Setting
Module 2	Communication in the Workplace	Mentorship and Learning New Skills	Understanding Workplace Culture
Module 3	Understanding Workplace Culture	Understanding Workplace Culture	Managing Work Tasks
Module 4	Developing a Professional Identity	Managing Work Tasks	Communication in the Workplace
Module 5	Mentorship and Learning New Skills	Communication in the Workplace	Developing a Professional Identity
Module 6	Collaborating with Colleagues	Developing a Professional Identity	Collaborating with Colleagues
Module 7	Representing your Internship	Representing your Internship	Representing your Internship

413

414 During the weeks in which most students moved between Modules 2 and 6, the students
415 completed similar assignments regardless of the module they'd chosen. This allowed me to offer
416 guidance along the genres and educational moves the students were experiencing: I could, for
417 example, help students analyse their experiences in their reflection writing regardless of their
418 module topic. This also offered students through lines with which to connect with each other.

419 As the course was largely asynchronous, students could also condense the modules and use
420 their two progress conferences as anchors to guide their work. The first conference was held
421 shortly after the beginning of their internship (for most, this meant the second week of the
422 semester, but it was later for a student whose internship started in Week 4). The second
423 conference was held halfway through the semester, regardless of the timing of the internship
424 itself. My goal during these conferences was threefold: to build rapport with each student, to offer
425 real-time support around questions each student had, and to emphasise each student's individual
426 goal-setting and growth. These conferences were held via Zoom for all students, regardless of
427 where they were living during their internship, and lasted anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour,
428 depending on the needs of the student.

429 **Next Steps: Building Community Online**
430 I ran the course with its flexible modules as a prototype this summer. The students reported
431 (through final reflections, course evaluations, and post-course emails) that they appreciated the
432 flexibility and found the content usefully tailored to their needs. Though students are now returning
433 to face-to-face internships, the changes to our internship course may stay. They acknowledge the

434 complex realities of students' work and educational lives in a "post-pandemic" environment. And
435 they prioritise accessibility in the learning process. The course was taught with my changes again
436 this fall, and the current instructor has received positive feedback about the structure. In meeting
437 students' need for flexibility, however, the design sacrificed the robust peer-mentoring of the
438 earlier course design. Future iterations of the course must take this element of community building
439 into account.

Kate B.'s Experience: Redefining Experiential Learning via Community Engagement

442 My focus here is on [The Cube](#), a community-engaged publication, UX design, and research centre
443 that I have directed since its creation in 2018. The Cube is housed in the department of Writing,
444 Rhetoric, and American Cultures, an independent writing program at Michigan State University;
445 The Cube is a space where diverse ranges of people, places, and communities participate in
446 communication projects of all kinds, from traditional book production to user experience research
447 to web and app development. We use a combination of agile and waterfall UX methodologies and
448 draw from the PARS model put forth by Borgman & McArdle.

449 The Cube's design and publication process creates opportunities for multiple paid internships,
450 which are often required for graduation. At any given time, The Cube employs upwards of 20
451 interns, students majoring in Professional and Public Writing, Experience Architecture, English,
452 creative writing, graphic design, communications, and interdisciplinary humanities. The projects
453 we undertake range from journal production, including *the Red Cedar Review* and *JOGLTEP*, to
454 web development for non-profits, to information architecture for university offices and
455 departments, to communications strategy for groups and individuals in our local communities.

456 We operate under the principle, following Kolb (1984), that concrete experience, reflecting, and
457 observing allows students to connect the theories and knowledge that we talk about in classrooms
458 with situations outside of classroom communities. Community learning in this context is a process
459 that I think of as a genuine desire to establish authentic partnership between The Cube's team
460 and the community partner or client, whether that partner is one person who has asked us to
461 update a website, a large non-profit asking us to help with communications strategy and
462 implementation, or someone with a book project who has struggled to find a publisher. This ethos
463 has the added bonus of providing multiple opportunities for connection and engagement—with
464 both our interns and our clients.

465 The Cube's process is a unique blend of academic and industry experiential learning. We take
466 each project from initial pitch to final delivery, pausing to consult with the client at every stage.
467 When we receive an initial pitch, we evaluate it to see if it aligns with our mission to "publish
468 projects with significant value to myriad communities both within and beyond Michigan State
469 University and East Lansing." We then source funding through grants, donations, and our annual
470 budget. Most of our budget goes to funding these experiential learning internships. Once funding
471 is agreed upon, we match our interns to the project based on interest, experience, and availability.
472 From there, we begin research and consultation with the client, followed by drafting and testing
473 until the deliverable is finalised. Through this process, we strive to maintain a praxis of open-
474 source, accessible and equitable publishing for every client we work with because we believe in
475 generating community impact (Melaville et al., 2006).

Our vision is to set a standard of high-quality, open-access publishing and community engagement in the fields of writing studies, UX, and digital humanities. Our theoretical and philosophical influences are drawn broadly from

- technical communication and professional writing (especially in the context of the social justice),
- user-centred design,
- user-experience design,
- information architecture, and
- experience architecture.

2018-19

In 2018, I was invited to develop and direct a digital publishing initiative, initially conceived of as a publishing collective. My department's goal was to add to our already robust internship program, oversee the publication of several department-run journals and magazines, build interesting learning opportunities for students, and provide real-world projects for students. We began with two interns—one UX intern and one research/writing intern—and set out to establish who we were and what we were about.

Between 2018 and the winter of 2019, The Cube worked on several projects with our two regular interns and a rotating cadre of project-specific student writers and editors:

- *agnès films* (social media, copyediting)
- *constellations: a cultural rhetorics publishing space* (social media, copyediting)
- *The Current* (full magazine production)
- *JOGLTEP* (copyediting, author relations)
- *Red Cedar Review* (website redesign)
- *Transcultural Feminist Philosophy* (proofreading)

In 2019, one of our two undergraduate majors successfully implemented a major curriculum revision, moving its emphasis from professional writing to professional *and public* writing. This shift marked a change in how our undergraduates think about their work and their professional goals, ultimately causing my small initiative to define itself differently. By the spring of 2020, as we all—and I include myself here—learned more about what it would mean to build and sustain a successful internship strategy, we rebranded as The Cube (publishing | process | praxis), and I shifted our values to include our communities outside of MSU/academic publishing and the student-focused emphasis to process and praxis, therefore enabling us to become more nimble. We pivoted to focusing less on traditional publishing and more on communications strategy, user experience, and information architecture, in particular for non-profits, a foundation that served us well during the pandemic.

2020-21

Our primary problem throughout the pandemic was budgetary; we were running out of money, since 99% of The Cube's annual budget goes to student wages. With The Cube's first graduate assistant, a master's student in our Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing program, we wrote a series of grant applications that led to approximately $20,000. We also began working with paying clients in some circumstances.

During the pandemic, we maintained work on the projects listed below and grew to include the following clients:

- East Lansing Public Schools' Mental Health Initiative (content strategy and web development)
- *Rejoice, Everyone!* (anthology production and design for a local reading series)
- *VIM Magazine* (full website support)
- *Indigenous Game Developers* (full website redesign)
- *Superheroes Die in the Summer* (book production and design; accompanying website)
- *SandraSeaton.com* (website for author and librettist)
- Giving Tree Farms (full content strategy and development; website redesign)

Our larger project/client list meant more opportunities for students. Throughout 2020–21, we grew to support 16 paid undergraduate interns and one graduate assistant.

2022-23

The pandemic caused an increased demand for The Cube's services, particularly for local K-12 and MSU clients in the wake of internal IT restructuring and outsourcing to local agencies whose estimates fall outside of those offices' budgetary constraints. As of the time of this writing, we have worked or are working on projects for two public-school initiatives and six MSU offices, focusing primarily on content strategy and web development. Our shift to include internal clients has increased our bottom line, thus leading to more opportunities for more students; it has also meant that we have had to learn various content management systems, as MSU uses a combination of WordPress, Sitecore, Drupal, and Cascade.

Our increased number of projects has meant the need for better project management solutions. This year, we experimented with several PM tools, ultimately settling on a combination of Basecamp, Google Suite tools, Slack, and Zoom, as no one tool will do everything we need it to do. We have cemented our process as a back-and-forth with team members to identify what works; we have been able to retain a sense of community throughout our expansion. The Cube continues to be a safe place to work—we encourage learning from mistakes–and our emphasis on project management gives our interns the skills they will need to be UX program managers *and* designers. We have increased our efficiency so that in addition to all of the projects listed above, we have done work or are working for:

- Holt Public Schools
- MSU Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education
- MSU Parking
- MSU Office of Fiscal Planning and Budget
- MSU Work/Life Office
- Spartan Resilience
- The Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures

… and Beyond

The pandemic made the Cube better and stronger. Our virtual work model continues to appeal to students who seek internship experience that reflects the professional worlds that they will enter after graduation; the model enables us to conduct synchronous meetings between classes and

558 even from the car. Mentorship continues to be the key to our success, and our shift to a fully
559 virtual work model has pushed me to be much more conscious of how I mentor students with
560 regard to setting professional boundaries; in fact, much of my mentoring, especially as my
561 students gain more technical skills than I possess, focuses on the soft skills (client relations,
562 communication, aligning professional and personal values, asking for help, seeking experts to
563 help solve problems, thinking empathetically) that will ultimately set our graduates apart from
564 others who have identical hard skills (see Olin Shanahan et al., 2015).

565 In order to learn how to be citizens, we have to act as citizens, and we provide a safe way for
566 students to practise being the kinds of citizens they want to be. Our mentorship model revolves
567 around both hard and soft skills with writing studies at the core. Throughout our processes, and
568 even when engaged in highly technical projects, we do a lot of thinking by writing; we do a lot of
569 reflecting; our deliverables often contain some sort of writing—whether web content, internal
570 strategy, or publishing a book—and all of these things align to create a holistic mentorship
571 experience in which our students can see the kinds of work that public intellectuals ought to be
572 doing.

573 Ultimately, The Cube relies on the intersections and overlaps between experience, community,
574 and mentorship of the kind that relies upon our small administrative team and me to be vulnerable,
575 authentic individuals. Any way we slice it, the work we do at The Cube and in writing studies more
576 broadly is about people. And letting people own their mistakes and learn from them is part of what
577 we must do in order to create human experiences in the humanities.

Conclusion + Futures

579 We are not "post-pandemic" in the sense that COVID-19 still impacts thousands of lives daily, but
580 we are in a world that cannot return to the way it operated prior to the pandemic. COVID-19 has
581 irrevocably altered the higher education landscape, and continues to change it now. Our work to
582 (re)design internship programs from 2020 onward reflects these changes, through the use of
583 digital resources to network, build infrastructure, develop innovative internship experiences, and
584 provide flexible remote and hybrid meeting and learning options for students. While we hope that
585 these lessons learned from the pandemic do not need to be applied again, the focus on the user
586 and learner experiences that we detail can and have been employed in emergency situations
587 beyond COVID-19; for example, the physical infrastructure at Allegra's university was severely
588 damaged by an EF-3 tornado in March 2018, forcing courses to move to emergency remote
589 instruction for the remainder of the semester. In her article on coordinating a writing program in
590 the wake of both an off-campus mass shooting and a global pandemic, Shah (2021) contends
591 that those who teach in and/or manage such programs must view crisis management as an
592 ongoing process for which they hold both personal and professional responsibility. This
593 demonstrates how a variety of contingencies and contexts can benefit from the flexible internship
594 experiences that we describe here, as the essential elements of internships (e.g., soft skills
595 mentoring, project management, attention to student-centred concerns, feedback, peer learning,
596 etc.) can transfer to many different settings.

597 We also wish to contribute to the digital resources available for imagining new futures in the wake
598 of these changes. In the spirit of *JUTLP*'s open access mission, which seeks to generate "new
599 knowledge applied to solve complex problems and deliver social benefits" (*Journal of University*

600 *Teaching & Learning Practice*, 2022), we have created a webpage with additional materials for
601 building and sustaining undergraduate internship programs. It is housed on Allegra's website at
602 http://allegra-w-smith.com/internships/. This page hosts syllabi and assignments from the
603 internship courses that we teach at our respective universities, learning outcomes, template
604 messages and forms used to contact prospective internship partners and build position
605 descriptions for students, promotional materials, and classroom resources like slide decks and
606 activities. We hope that these resources will help other higher education researchers, teachers,
607 and administrators to architect professional writing experiences for students that build their skills
608 for a labour market forever changed by COVID-19.

Conflict of Interest

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