

# Assessing and Writing about the Myriad of Complex Ethical Issues of Risk and Relationships in Professional Writing Internships



Joseph Bartolotta  
University of New Mexico  
21 March 2015  
@jbartolotta

# Internships

**Sorcerer**



**Apprentice**



# Apprentice



# Chaos



Animated Broom Apocalypse

**TALK ABOUT RISKY!**

# Our Student/Interns Are Like Mickey

They operate in a strange space between the academy and industry.

They are (hopefully) enlisted to some responsibility as writers.

Writing practice is dynamic and immediately contextualized

How do novice professional writers navigate complex ethical issues involving risk communication?



Do we even have a framework from which to explore this question?

# Internships as Pedagogy

Lev Vygotsky (1980)

“zone of proximal development”

It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (86)

*Yes, I know he's talking about children here...bear with me*

# Internships as Pedagogy (part II)

Lave & Wenger (1991)

Situated Learning has 4 components

1. It is located in the actions of everyday situations.
2. Knowledge is acquired through situations and transfers to similar situations.
3. Learning is the result of social processes that include ways of thinking, perceiving, problem solving, and interacting with others and the environment, in addition to traditional forms of declarative and procedural knowledge.
4. Knowledge is not separated from experience but exists in social environments comprised of persons, activities, and environments. (cited in Sides, 2007)

# Savage & Seible (2006)

“Perhaps the most difficult obstacle to establishing professional standards for internships is the lack of qualified professionals at the internship site to supervise the internship. Indeed, in our own experience, even in organizations where a number of well-trained technical communicators are employed, interns placed in those settings are not supervised by advanced technical communicators and often are not even placed where they are able to work with experienced members of the field” (66-7).

# Bremner (2012)

“In the context of situated learning, a distinction has been made between interactions where the goal is learning, as found in the academy, and those where the goal is task completion and learning an incidental by-product, as often found in the workplace” (27).

# The challenges:

Are students essentially children at the feel of adult mentors?  
(In response to Vygotsky)

Are internships too specific of an environment to understand generalizable risk? (In response to Lave and Wenger)

When we entrust internship mentors, what are we giving up pedagogically? (In response to Savage & Sielbe)

How do we position students best to identify, understand, and respond to risks in writing? (in response to Bremner)

# Larger challenge:

## Is the internship undertheorized as pedagogy?

Much research drawn into internships focus on writing development

Li, 2000; Bazerman, 1994; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Anson & Forsberg, 1990; Dias & Paré, 2000; Freedman & Adam, 2000... to name a few

Savage & Seilbe observe the labor issues connected with internship administration:

In many programs, the job of coordinating internships is extra duty; that is, there is no course release for internship coordinators. This policy may actually reflect the kind of resistance mentioned above or may simply be the sort of exploitation, almost always directed at untenured faculty members, that has plagued academia for many years and continues today. Such conditions work against the possibility of having well managed programs, consistent standards within programs, or having experienced coordinators who are willing to stay in that role. **Internship coordinators who work without release time for their duties are unlikely to be familiar with theories of experiential and cooperative learning**, and they have no motivation to regard internships as an area of serious pedagogy or of scholarship. (66)

# Mickey Mouse: Internship Failure?



Or Internship *Victim*?



How do novice professional writers navigate complex ethical issues involving risk communication?

# University of New Mexico Professional Writing Internship

## Placements:

- Sandia National Laboratories
- Local food Co-Ops
- Santa Fe Institute
- Local publications
- Scientific/Medical laboratories
- Local Museums
- Community literacy projects

Variable 1-3 credit course, credit enrollment chosen by students

30-48 students enroll in the Internship annually

Classroom Component including written assignments

# “Risky” writing situations novice writers face

Issues of libel/slander

Lack of Supervision by expert writers

Issues of authority

Issues of genre/field/industrial procedural knowledge

Issues of office-political status

Issues of labor designation/assigned roles

Potential transferability of internship experience.

# What an Internship class *could* be?

## Piloting at UNM:

- Online professional portfolio

- Interviewing more people from the area they wish to enter as writers.

- Final paper that gives students a chance to reflect upon and make sense of the internship experience.

- Performing a presentation about their internships for newer Professional Writing Students

# Next steps

## Testing a theory of internship pedagogy

How do students identify risk? Is risk contextualized by classroom experience, internship experience, or some other expectation?

How do students talk about risky writing in post-internship reflections and discussions about the internship?

What is the role of the teacher, and how are mentors brought into the fold to balance “instructorly” and “employerly” training?

# Thank You

[jbartolotta@unm.edu](mailto:jbartolotta@unm.edu)

@jbartolotta