

What is Inkshedding?

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"Inkshedding" began as a practice in the early eighties, when Jim Reither and I began trying to make "freewriting" (which we had learned about from writers like [Peter Elbow](#)) into something dialogically transactional. Actually, we didn't articulate what we wanted in quite that way, at the time. The way we said it was that what we wanted was to give writing a social role in a classroom, and thus to create a situation in which the writing was read by real readers, in order to understand and respond to *what* was said rather than to evaluate and "help" with the writing.

We did this in our classes by asking students to freewrite in response to a shared experience -- a reading, a class discussion, an event -- and then arranging to have the freewritten texts passed around for reading, asking the readers to mark with a vertical line in the margin passages in which the writer said something "striking," something that seemed to them interesting or new or outrageous. We then arranged for the passages marked most often to be transcribed, photocopied, and distributed at the next class meeting.

It was Jim who came up with the word "inkshed," having found it in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It wasn't exactly a description of what we were doing; the Oxford offers it as a "humorous" word, meaning "the shedding or spilling of ink; consumption or waste of ink in writing." The word had been used earlier by Marvell and Sterne, but our favorite quotation was from Carlyle: "With no bloodshed . . . but with immense beershed and inkshed."

The ways in which inkshedding functions and the ways in which it has been used and modified in varying situations have grown and changed profoundly, of course, in the decades since then. In some ways, in fact, it has turned out to be a reasonable *synecdoche* for my general stance as a teacher, which has been focused on finding ways to foster growth in literacy by making it more directly and perceptibly instrumental. Inkshedding turned out to have a rich range of implications, many of which we hadn't anticipated at all.

For me, maybe the most important of these implications was composing text in such a situation increases the likelihood -- even with novice writers -- that the text will be formed with an anticipation of audience. As oral language is uttered, it is shaped in large part by the need to address a particular interlocutor or discourse situation. [James Britton](#) called this "shaping at the point of utterance." Like speech, writing, it has always seemed to me, needs this pressure; inkshedding can provide it. It's not always true the first few times a group or individual engages in inkshedding, but over a few experiences you can begin to see telltale evidences of the way audience pressure (which the writer may or may not be conscious of) affects the shape of the text, in things like clarity of handwriting and increased explicitness of reference.

It's also important that during inkshedding ideas, positions, and questions which would not otherwise attain a hearing have a better opportunity to get "on the floor" than they would in an oral discussion. A significant force in the original impetus for using inkshedding in classrooms was the perception that classroom discussions tend to be dominated by a few voices. This is natural, as the "bandwidth" for classroom discussion -- at least for *whole* class discussions -- is very narrow. Only one voice can be heard at any one time: for what *everyone* thought about an event to be articulated and discussed is not only practically difficult, even in a small class, but socially constraining: the first few utterances tend very strongly to determine and focus the range of discussion, and effectively determine the kinds of questions or issues which will be raised. [Anthony Paré](#), in a comment on an earlier draft of this piece, says, "I've always felt that inkshedding allowed for the individual exploration of a top-of-the-head response before that response is deflected, diminished, or destroyed by the first question or comment spoken out loud. Inkshedding allows each member of the group to 'gather' her/his thoughts before they are scattered by that first, articulate, confident person who gets up to say what you weren't even thinking about."

What written discussion tends to do is broaden the bandwidth everyone in the room can, as it were, talk at once. But

what is even more important is that every idea or response has a chance not only to be formed in the first place, but also to be "heard."

That "hearing" is important. What is often overlooked in this situation indeed, in any discussion of student writing is the importance of *reading*. Writing, of course, had been seen as central from the very beginning, in the origins of the practice as freewriting (which might or might not ever be read). But what differentiates the social practice of inkshedding from what we might call the expressivist practice of freewriting is that the text is *read*. And even more, that the text is read in what we can characterize as "dialogic" ways -- that is, read *for what it says*, *dialogically*, not in order to evaluate it or to "help" the writer "improve" her text. And because the reading occurs immediately, and in public, the writer has a good chance to come to realize this.

The nature of this reading, and of the social transaction it affords, is an issue which has come to seem to me increasingly important. The concept of "transaction" -- in the sense defined by [Dewey and Bentley](#), in their *Knowing and the Known* -- is central here, because it reminds us that no component of the process can be understood or characterized outside the process. The writer is influenced by the reading, and her understanding of that reading, as much as the reader is influenced by the writer, and the whole event itself cannot be understood outside its relation to preceding and subsequent events, in what Peirce called the infinite web of semiosis. As [Anthony Paré](#) pointed out in that same commentary, "Texts are located in an intertextual web. This is something students don't (can't) get, since their texts are not linked to other texts. Students eavesdrop on the disciplinary conversation and report what they've heard; they don't *join* the conversation. They are intellectual voyeurs. Inkshedding gets them into the action."

A number of ways of organizing situations to make this reading more central and more influential -- more a part of the action -- have evolved. At the beginning, we asked for small teams of volunteer editors to read all the inksheds produced on a given occasion, marking with vertical lines in the margin passages which they found "striking." The more people who found a passage striking, the more vertical lines accumulated; a secretary could, in theory, simply transcribe passages in a fairly mechanical way, beginning with those with the most vertical lines. The transcribed passages could be photocopied and distributed for a subsequent meeting of class, to start off a further discussion (or another session of inkshedding) with the ideas which had survived this evolutionary pruning process.

Early on -- especially as we began to use inkshedding as a way of structuring discussions at conferences and workshops -- the decisions of the "editorial committee" became a subject of dispute. Everyone wanted to read everything (or, to be a bit more cynical, perhaps everyone wanted *her own* writing to be read by everyone else). One response to this was to post all the inksheds on the wall; what this meant, however, was that in practice very few were read -- in general, only those with extremely clear handwriting.

Another response was to allow a "reading time" immediately after the inkshedding, in which anyone could read anybody else's and mark "striking" passages for transcription. These "reading times" often become one of the most powerful moments in my own teaching and conference participation, as people silently exchange sheets of paper and a "discussion" occurs in almost complete silence, punctuated by *sotto voce* expressions of agreement or outrage, or laughter. There is something particularly powerful about the fact that the reading and selection is being done immediately, or as one anonymous commentator on an early version of this text put it, "in real time."

A further extension of the reading process -- especially if there's a pressure for an immediate discussion, rather than waiting for the process of transcription and copying -- involves asking individuals to find one passage from someone else's inkshed to read aloud. This elevates reading to an even more central position and is especially powerful for novice writers. One of the most important educational aspects of inkshedding, for me, is the way it foregrounds and dramatizes the transactional nature of text. For almost all students (and this is especially important for those who have difficulties, or limited experience, with writing and reading), text has *never* been the basis of an authentic social transaction -- beyond, perhaps, a thank you note to a distant grandmother or, more recently, e-mail exchanges with friends. The process of creating an identity and a role in a group through written text, as they do every day through oral utterance, is one in which they have only rarely engaged. And it is my belief that this process is the defining mark of the fully literate person.

Of course, one of the most persistent questions about inkshedding has to do with ethos: are inksheds signed? Oral

contributions to a discussion are, of course, always "signed"; there's no question whose voice you're hearing when the person is across the room from you. Inksheds, however, can be signed or not, and there are powerful and persuasive arguments on both sides of the question. On the side of signing them is the argument that taking responsibility for what you've said encourages not only a deepened reflection about its possible consequences, and thus a more active awareness of the reader and a more attentive consideration of what might be called the "rhetorical back-pressure," the anticipation of response that shapes language at the point of utterance. On the side of not signing them is the argument that it is one of the characteristic strengths of written language that it needs to create its ethos within the bounds of the text, that -- as Socrates noticed -- once you've let that text go it goes around saying the same thing over and over, beyond your control or influence, to people who don't know you and are unable to read it with you there to warrant it and immediately respond to misinterpretations. Does it make a difference? Clearly. Is one better? It depends, it seems to me, on the situation. In practice, at conferences and workshops, I usually leave it up to the writer.

Inkshedding moved toward becoming an institution when, in response to discussions among Canadian delegates to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and influenced by the powerful collegial informality of the Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English, Jim Reither and I organized the first "Inkshed Working Conference" in Fredericton, in 1984. One of the features of the conference was that we conducted discussions after sessions by means of inkshedding, taking the "edited" inksheds and transcribing, photocopying and publishing the most-marked passages within a few hours of the session. The first morning of the conference, the edited inksheds from the opening evening session were distributed at breakfast, and their impact on the conference was profound.

The next year, Chris Bullock and Kay Stewart at the University of Alberta and Grant MacEwan Community College organized a second conference in Alberta, and within a year or so there was [a regular newsletter](#) (edited for the first few years by Jim Reither) and an annual national conference, dedicated not only to exploring literacy and learning, but to extending and testing the limits of the ways in which scholarly or professional conferences can be organized, and attracting writing teachers, English and education professors, public school teachers, graduate students, and others (regularly, the conference and the listserv have included a bracing range of disciplinary perspectives -- from writing teachers at the Bank of Canada to professors of religious studies, from tutors in writing centers to cognitive psychologists and professors of engineering).

There is now a national organization, the [Canadian Association for the Study of Language and Learning](#) (CASLL); an [Inkshed Newsletter](#) (under a floating editorship, currently based at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design); an annual conference now in its twenty-second year; an occasional publisher of monographs, based at the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg); a website (<http://www.stu.ca/inkshed/>) and an electronic listserv, CASLL.

Electronic Inkshedding and Contextualized Reading

What has perhaps been most important about inkshedding for me is the power of its basic idea -- that writing written in the expectation of reading and response, especially *immediate* reading and response, will do more to engage the writer in making, using Linda Flower's term, "reader-based" decisions in an active way than writing whose reader has to be imagined up out of whole cloth. It was clear from the moment I began to explore electronic networks as a medium for the exchange of texts that the potential for that immediacy was, at least potentially, powerfully enhanced by electronic mediation.

Thus, the fundamental ideas involved in the practice of inkshedding have extended inexorably into, and shaped, the increasing use of computer-mediated writing and reading in my teaching. As, over the past few years, students arrive in my classes with more and more experience with computers and computer networks, it has become increasingly rare for paper-based pen-and-ink inkshedding to continue in my courses much beyond the second or third week of class. Very quickly new forms supplant the use of pen and paper.

Such forums present new challenges and opportunities, of course. Contexts for reading can become a powerful and unpredictable force. Some years ago on a now-defunct electronic forum, Roger Graves said, discussing reading and writing that is electronically mediated, "I just read some of the . . . discussion on Will's ["Will's Virtual Restoration and Eighteenth Century Coffeehouse," the electronic forum I often use as part of my eighteenth-century literature class], and I was trying to decide what was different about it -- different from face-to-face/classroom talk. I think some of

those things wouldn't be said. . . . I think there is a different quality to the talk here, and I think not having to say it to a room of people who might laugh *while you're still physically present* makes it easier for some people to say/write things. So a) this wouldn't have happened without the technology, and b) the quality of critical thought seems measurably better."

In response, I said,

"I think, yes, it does make a difference that people aren't physically present (and that's not always a good difference: it allows people the freedom to say potentially risky things, but it also affords flaming). But I think I started thinking more seriously about this on the way home from the conference that a much more important difference is *the way these texts are read*.

An outsider to this discussion simply can't read the texts the way a member of it can, because the member is reading with the constant knowledge that her role is to *respond*. She's expected to (indeed, she's required to, in some sense: she can choose which to respond to, but if she chooses not to respond at all she essentially eliminates herself from the class).

I think the knowledge that you're reading *as a member of the discourse community* changes the way you read in ways that are a whole lot more than trivial. It makes you a Bakhtinian reader ("understanding is nothing more nor less than the preparation of a response" that's not accurately quoted, but it's close enough for government work¹) with a vengeance. You're a member of the community in the same way that I'm a member of (for instance) the 4Cs community (CCCC), or for a better example, maybe, because smaller and more intimate the Inkshed one. And I think that awareness also changes what you'll write, and how.

I've regularly been reminded of this as I've tried to show people a text taken out of such a context -- an online discussion board or a class email list, for example -- and demonstrate how it exemplifies the sort of discourse produced in such a community. People who aren't members of the community almost always read the text very differently in the new context. A brilliant move in a online conversation, such as a reference to shared experience or knowledge, or a pulling together of previously disconnected ideas, can be seen as arrogant, flippant or incomprehensible in a different, larger conversation. It can be difficult to help people see the way a particular choice represents a move in a specific conversation rather than a "public" text (a move in a larger conversation). This is a more complicated and rich distinction than it seems, stated flatly like that: I'm not simply pointing to things like jocularity of tone or personal references that may be present and visible in the text, but to how a reader who is a member of the group will attend to and foreground particular passages because of the conversation of which this inkshed is a part, and someone who isn't, won't.

Does this mean that this sort of writing differs radically from "public" writing? Of course. But it's also true, as all the work in the theory of genres has shown us, that public writing itself varies profoundly from situation to situation. The trick is to get the knack of knowing how to live in new, unfamiliar genres. Inkshedding, I believe, can jump-start that process.

How inkshedding can go wrong

One of the most important characteristics of the process is the one most likely to be forgotten; inkshedding constitutes a radical challenge to conventional ways of thinking about writing in the academy. Because of this, it's very easy for it slide back to the default mode, to be implemented in ways that stop challenging those conventional ways of thinking and begin cooperating with them, thus becoming more comfortable - and losing all the unique value of the process. At worst, when imposed without explicit, structural support for the reading and use of the texts produced, it can substitute a kind of mechanical, perfunctory, dutiful text production that looks very much like most "school writing" but lacks the validation of teacher feedback and grading.

Among the important characteristics of inkshedding that it's easy to lose sight of are:

- Inkshedding needs to be read, immediately and for what it says
- The reading has to be social, and cannot be evaluative or judgmental

- Inkshedding is part of a social situation, and needs to be read in a social context -- and it has to have the potential to affect that situation

It's possible that "publication" can become an end in itself. It's of course easy for this to happen among academics, where publication often counts for so much (and reading counts for almost nothing). It's poisonous to communication (as it is in a great deal of scholarly writing and publication, which is created and consumed solely in order to keep score for purposes of hiring, promotion and tenure, grant competitions, and general agonistic competitiveness. In such situations, people often care what someone else says only insofar as it might offer an opportunity for refutation, or constitute a danger to one's own potential publication. Because this is so pervasive, and so silent, in our profession it's easy for us to forget that written text is capable of actually constituting a medium for social discourse. It is -- but only if appropriately treated.

Latency is critical. "Publication" is a waste of time: beyond their immediate context, like conversation, Inksheds can be studied, but they can't really be read. They need to be circulated immediately, and used. The older an inkshed is, the staler. It has a short shelf life. Serve it fresh or not at all. A good way to dramatize that inksheds are not quick ways to generate permanent texts, but are rather ways to render text conversational, is to throw them away when they've served their function -- that is, when they've been read and had an effect on the social situation in which they arose.

Selecting, editing, transcribing

If inksheds are to be used other than immediately it's important to pay some serious attention to the processes by which the written texts are transmitted into a new situation. Inksheds read immediately and shared in the same conversation (for instance, when they're passed around and people decide on comments to read aloud) need much less selection, and usually get what they need as a result of the oral conversational situation. If they're brought back later (say, to a subsequent class meeting, or copied and distributed the next day at a conference) they need more massaging, or they may seem simply pointless fragments.

Readers can do the editing and selection. This is what might be called "classic" inkshedding, simply because it was the way it was done first. It's important to make clear to readers, however, that as part of their reading they should mark -- clearly and unequivocally -- passages that strike them as worth noting, worth passing on. A good way to handle this is to ask each reader, if she agrees that a marked passage is interesting or striking, to add an additional mark (vertical lines in the margin are the clearest way to do this). After a given amount of time for reading and marking (and it's important not to skimp on the time allowed: it's worth bearing in mind that what's going on in the silence *is* discussion), transcribers can take the raw inksheds and transcribe whatever is most frequently marked (again, this isn't merely a mechanical process: markers often mark carelessly or don't include enough to make the context clear), printing and photocopying the resulting text.

Ad hoc "inkshedding" committees can perform the same function, though there are dangers in foregrounding the editing and selection process and in replicating the agonistic struggles for limited publication space that are one of the more unpleasant characteristics of academic life. The more consensual and widespread the choices, and the more collaboratively they're made, the better. It's particularly important that the process be as expeditious as possible, and that the selected, transcribed and printed inksheds be distributed quickly. Even skilfully selected, inksheds are more like conversation than like considered, planned and revised text, and depend more on their immediate social context for relevance and even comprehensibility.

¹The actual quote from Bakhtin is "all real and integral understanding is actively responsive, and constitutes nothing other than the initial preparatory stage of a response." (*Speech Genres*, 69)

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For further reading

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