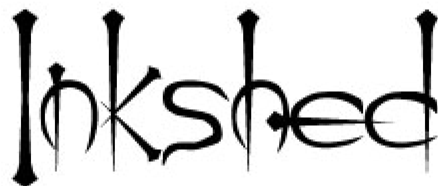

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Inkshed provides a forum for its subscribers to explore relationships among research, theory, and practice in language acquisition and language use. Subscribers are invited to submit informative pieces such as notices, reports, and reviews of articles, journals, books, textbooks, conferences, and workshops, as well as polemical discussions of events, issues, problems, and questions of concern to teachers in Canada interested in writing and reading theory and practice.

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Editorial "Non-writing"

With sixty [or 30, or 40, or 50?] staring me in the face, I have developed inflammation of the sentence structure and a definite hardening of the paragraphs. (James Thurber)

James Thurber attributes writing problems to age. I would attribute my writing problems to under-utilization: I have spent so much time lately *not* writing (when you're in charge of a computer lab, and your techie quits without a replacement, you suddenly have to take on tasks that don't include writing; and the only reading you do is computer manuals). So whether it's the ravages of age, or lack of practice, or . . . (fill in your own excuse here), we can come up with all sorts of reasons for not writing our own stuff. But we* hope that you can overcome any excuses and send us your writing/ musings.

In this issue we're printing the collaborative work of Kenna Manos, Pat Sadowy and James Brown from last year's Inkshed 11 conference in Fredericton. (The conference plans had been to publish the products of the on-site collaboration; however, few groups had a finished product -- indeed, most felt that the process of collaboration had been the goal, not a finished document.) Next month we will publish the collaborative work of Doug Brent, Mary-Louise Craven, Jane Ledwell-Brown, and Margaret Procter. (Any other Inkshed 11 attendees who want us to publish their work? Or who want to comment on their collaborative experience?) As well, we've included an article submitted by Laurence Steven to the *Globe and Mail*: they wouldn't publish it -- I guess they figured they'd O.D.ed on "writing issues." We, however, are pleased to publish it!

As well, please note that if you haven't already sent in your renewal forms for Inkshed (and that includes me and ......) please make the cheque (for $27.50 if you're gainfully employed, or $17.50 if you're a grad. student or a part-timer) payable to "Inkshed at NSCAD." Mail it to Kenna Manos, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 5163 Duke Street, Halifax, N.S. B3J 3J6. We will continue to mail you newsletters even if you haven't paid, but soon our good-will will evaporate (and/or we'll get some reliable book-keeping methods), and you'll lose contact with Inkshed and the Inkshed community!

We continue to be concerned about the CASLL vs. the non-CASLL Inkshedders (CASLL is the name of the listserv that Russ Hunt maintains; if you have an email address you can subscribe to the listserv). In this issue, Leslie Sanders has summarized an on-line discussion about teaching writing to law students; a number of other conversations have taken place since then, and we will either 1) make hard-copy transcripts available to non-CASLLers, or continue to summarize the discussion and publish it in Inkshed.

* I am mindful of Twain's admonition: "Only presidents, editors and people with tapeworm have the right to use the editorial 'we'."

All quotations are from W.O.W.: Writers on Writing, edited by Jon Winokur,
Running Press Book Publishers, 1986.

Mary-Louise Craven (on behalf of the Inkshed Editorial Board)

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A Rich Atmosphere for Writing, Not an Oxygen Tent (a piece the Globe wouldn't print)

Both Ted Chase's Globe and Mail Facts and Arguments essay on May 5, 1994 ("English 0100: A Non-credit Way to Fix, Not Fail"), and Alexandra Moss's April 12 response piece ("University is Not the Place to Teach Remedial English"), are traditional university reactions to the literacy "crisis": both lament the egregious writing of many of our post-secondary students, both exonerate the universities from any blame for the poor showing their students make, both believe that "wholesale changes to the present elementary and secondary school systems" are urgently needed. Despite Chase's claim to responsibility and innovation through Nipissing University's non-credit English 0100, their solutions are not far apart. Moss says fail them; Chase says isolate the critical cases in an English intensive care ward, er, I mean course, so they'll be forced to realize they have a problem, and rectify it.

There is another route, one which acknowledges that the world in which our educational system exists has changed significantly over the past two generations, and that while the elementary and secondary systems have been trying to adapt to this change, Canadian universities, for the most part, have not. The pattern of Chase's university, Nipissing, is a case in point. Though they instituted a graduation competency requirement in 1985 (this was actually a Laurentian University system requirement; Nipissing was an affiliated college until 1992), they did nothing until 1994 about the quite significant number of students who did not clear it. One can imagine that after eight years there was a sizable group of students who had completed all their degree requirements but the one for competency, and that they were getting mad.

Chase's bold, "proactive" plan sounds more like a last ditch attempt to deal with an increasingly uncomfortable problem. The cure provided is the standard one: send them to the specialists in English to get fixed. The real beauty of the English 0100 solution, though, is that by setting up a non-credit course staffed by one "dedicated and gifted instructor" (though an unnamed one), Nipissing is now "fully justified in insisting that all students in our courses write adequately." To me this is awfully close to stating frankly that 0100 is a sop to the ameliorists, those who genuinely want to work for change in the writing facility of students. By setting up English 0100 as the cure-all Nipissing lets the rest of its academic community off the hook. There will be two reactions among other faculty: a professor may insist on adequate writing, and fail those who don't have it, which undermines the "fix, not fail" ethos of Chase's title; or, more likely, the prof will do nothing at all about writing (as per normal), but will now be able to point the finger at the 0100 scapegoat if the student doesn't graduate.

Chase says students have a hard time believing they have a problem when they've passed elementary and secondary school, and most of university. And so they should. We need to get away from the rhetoric of disease and dysfunction. These people are functioning -- they're succeeding at most of the educational tasks we set them. They're not failures. Or if they are then our whole school system is -- and that's patently crisis rhetoric; despite differing perceptions of parts of the system, as a whole a Canadian education is still one of the best in the world. According to the April 1994 Profile of Post-Secondary Education in Canada, published by the Education Support Branch of Human Resources Development Canada, "Canada ranks second only to the United States in the proportion of its population enrolled in post-secondary education," and allocated a greater percentage of Gross Domestic Product on post-secondary education than any other OECD country. Which is not to say that students are all writing with the facility universities expect of them; they clearly aren't. But that facility is something Western society says it values, while increasingly valuing others forms of technological communication even more -- TV, video, computer, internet; read Grant, or Postman, or McLuhan, or Havelock, or Ellul on how we are reshaping ourselves to "interface" with these technologies.

And how does the society inculcate the literacy it says it values? Traditionally we've said English teachers do it. But think a moment. Only a generation or two ago English teachers could comfortably don the mantle of expert, of cure-all. They were known as grammar checkers and gatekeepers. And finally that's all the expertise related to, even though for the majority of their time English teachers taught literature. Why then was English considered the cure-all? Could it really be that the grammar students got there made them better writers? No. English got the kudos by default. Those students who wrote better did so because the extra-curricular competition for their attention was far weaker. Kids read more because there was no TV; they wrote more because telecommunications weren't as developed. They were more verbally than visually oriented -- words were the touchstones, not images. And we must remember, at the same time, that fewer students went to high school, fewer completed it, and fewer still went to the far fewer universities. (The Profile mentioned above says that 70,251 students attended university full-time in Canada in 1951, but in 1993 there were 585,200). But even then, as now, the universities got the cream of the crop. So of course students had greater writing facility. There was a community, a culture of writing people, so students got writing, by osmosis. It was the atmosphere they breathed.

Things have changed; we might say the atmosphere has thinned. And what do we tend to do as a result of seeing a general decrease in writing level among our multitudes of students? Blame them, blame English, and blame the lower schools. Ironically, the lower schools are concentrating on writing -- as an act, how we do it -- more than they ever did even a generation ago. We've got to get beyond blaming, and recognize that if we want a general increase in writing level we'll only get it by providing the community -- or more consciously -- a "culture" within which our students will again breathe writing like air.

The atmospheric alternative to the Moss/Chase castigate/cure route is well illustrated by the experience of Laurentian University in Sudbury. When Laurentian created its graduation competency requirement in 1985 it did so for a three year trial period. In 1988, after our first experience of denying graduation to students who hadn't met the degree requirement, we had a choice to make. Rather than creating a remedial ghetto in English (which would have necessitated seven new full-time faculty members to staff, or a virtual horde of, in all likelihood, female part-timers) we chose to create a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program to back up the degree requirement. Consequently, students who do not score a 1 on our 4 point scale (it was 3 point until the review but we recognized that borderline cases were hidden; Nipissing didn't change this) are strongly urged to enrol in a section of a WAC course, which is a regular credit course but one in which the instructor agrees to incorporate writing into the pedagogy. This is not simply a course where the prof checks grammar, but one where the student, through the structure of the course, "writes to learn" rather than simply "learning to write." The emphasis is on course content, but the route to it is through a culture of writing. The instructor provides a competency score at the end of the course, based on all writing done, for any students who have not yet cleared the competency requirement, and receiving a 1 here means the student needn't sit the test again. Students experiencing most difficulty with our standards -- who score 4 on the holistically graded competency essay test -- are encouraged to work one-on-one with a tutor in the writing centre. Here they may look directly at persistent grammar issues. Rather than follow Nipissing's route and reduce their credit complement one time, then let them proceed to 3rd or 4th year and deny them graduation, we say they cannot proceed beyond 30 credits (1st year) until they score a 3. We also say those scoring a 3 cannot proceed beyond 60 credits until they score 2.

Laurentian, a bilingual institution, consistently has about 2% of the approximately 3000 students tested each year receive a 4, with 3s, 2s, and 1s about equally divided. The WAC program (Langue IntŽgrŽe aux Programmes -- LIP -- en franais) currently has 87 course sections with an enrollment of 2368 students, across the faculties of Humanities, Social Sciences, Science and Engineering, and Professional Schools. Of this total only about 1/4 haven't cleared the competency requirement. Clearly they are not being relegated to a ghetto. Professors of WAC/LIP courses form an interdisciplinary team to grade the competency tests in September and April. It is this group from across the disciplines that determines the standards for writing within the Laurentian University culture. And it works, in the immediately practical sense that very few students here are denied graduation because they haven't met our degree requirement. But far more importantly, it works because the atmosphere for writing at Laurentian is getting richer by the year, for all who breathe it -- students, faculty, and administrators alike.

Laurence Steven
(Vice-dean of Humanities at Laurentian University)

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Extracts of E-mail messages on CASLL-L (about legal writing)

I asked CASLL-L members for advice because I've been asked to provide some writing instruction support to Osgoode Law School at York University. Here are edited versions of the helpful comments I've received. Many thanks!
Leslie Sanders. email: leslie@writer.yorku.ca>

. In response to your request re legal writing, the Native Law Center at U of S has a program where writer consultants with backgrounds in Law and/or English help students. The person who coordinates that is Ruth Thompson.
Lorraine Cathro. email: cathrol@herald.usask.ca

. If I were you I'd try to get involved as closely with the course as possible. Right now it sounds as though the law profs have a vague sense that something isn't right with their students' writing--maybe they use too many commas--and would like you to fix it up, preferably overnight. From our experience, this can be a disaster. Try to meet with specific professors and see if you can get a workshop or two tied directly into certain courses--perhaps their introductory course, if they've got one. Pick one or two of the specific assignments that they will be getting and tailor the workshop toward "How to write an X" rather than "How to write anything at all." See if the prof(s) will show you good/bad samples. What are they looking for in terms of format, genre expectations, etc.

The big trick is to get the profs to think of all of that as "writing." They probably think of good sentence structure as "writing" (your job) and the rest of it as "content" (their job).

The ideal would be to get in a position to extract some writing from the students and then team-mark it with the law people. That's a tall order but it would really pay off in establishing connections.
Doug Brent. email: dabrent@acs.ucalgary.ca

. I think you'll find that what "good" writing means in this context will be very specific indeed--and all [Doug's] advice about working closely with the legal experts is most appropriate.

One thing you could try in order to get a better handle on the situation is to ask one or more of the legal instructors to talk with you while they are marking a set of papers and to explain with specific examples the difference between A, B, and C papers. The criteria i.e. what makes "good" writing in this situation will be either tacit or almost tacit for these reader/writers. But often in explaining evaluation--to outsiders--the criteria become less tacit and thus more teachable. It's often a learning experience both for the instructor and for the language expert.

. One other thing you might have to clarify at the beginning of this project--who is this written discourse for? From the way you have been 'speaking' I presume you are talking about legal writing for legal readers. Both my advice and

Doug's advice (I think) is premised on that assumption. But if the real problem is that the instructors want their students to be able to write to outside readers, then you have a different problem.
Catherine Schryer. email: cschryer@watarts.uwaterloo.ca

. I agree with Doug. But I'll state it in a slightly different way. As Jones said in a good CCC article last year, writing instructors do not understand the intricacies of electrical engineering, and electrical engineers probably are not consciously aware of the rhetorical subtleties of their profession's writing nor of how best to teach writing; therefore a partnership or a team is crucial.
Jim Bell - Coordinator - LSC. email: jimb@unbc.edu

. Legal writing has been taken up by an increasing numbers of US. law schools in recent years as it has become clear that law students have difficulty writing clear and cogent arguments. Some law schools have even undertaken the radical step of hiring permanent writing faculty. There is an outfit called the Legal Writing Institute which has been in existence for three or four years and publishes a journal twice, I think, a year. It just held its annual, or is it bi-annual? conference in Chicago.
Here, at U. Colo-Denver, we teach a course in Legal Reasoning and Writing in the English department which approaches legal writing as a subject of rhetorical interest. Jim Stratman initiated the course and has done some interesting work on the reading and writing processes of law students and appellate court judges.
Jon W. Wood. email: jwood@carbon.denver.colorado.edu

. Here's a bibliographical reference, actually a reference to a bibliographical article: in Michael G. Moran and Debra Journet, eds. Research In Technical Communication: A Bibliographical Sourcebook, the article by Russel Rutter, "Resources for Legal Writing." Dated 1985, so it's not current, but still seems sensible. The main book they recommend is David Mellinkoff, The Language Of The Law. I've used it and second their praise.
Margaret Procter. email: procter@epas.utoronto.ca

. Unless you ask pointed questions or have an extended discussion, you should perhaps be careful about what professors say is wrong with student writing. In my experience, they often focus on what they can objective point at (e.g., what they call "grammar") when their real concerns are often with more substantive matters (e.g., coherence, line of argument). The professors who complain often lack the expertise about discourse to designate what you or I would see if we looked at the papers that upset them. Perhaps you could ask the complaining professors to each give you two or three examples of typical--not the worst--weak papers. And, of course, for contrast of typical--not the best--papers that make them happy.
Richard Coe. email: pcoe@sfu.ca

. I hear you're in need of "legal assistance." Don't know if this suggestion will be of any help but ... I suggest you contact a friend and colleague of my mine, Mark Weisberg at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. He teaches in the Faculty of Law and offers a very interesting (and tremendously popular) course at Queen's which is offered to law and medical students. I don't have the appropriate (or accurate) descriptors for the course but it involves students writing narratives of experience based on their personal and professional lives. Obviously a good many issues (pedagogical and otherwise) arise out of people writing their lives.
Gary William Rasberry. email: rasberry@unixg.ubc.ca

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Business English 112: Revolutionary Blues

The classroom is buzzing

in martial chorus.
They are drafting a petition,
indignant voices inform me,
against, some administrative evil
that offends their rights and sensibilities.

I am pleased to see them
politicised, mobilized into
articulate expression
or a cause.
Often, it is so difficult
to draw out the threads of enthusiasm
and I exhaust myself in the pulling,
unravelling.

At last, I think,
I can put theory into practice.
Assign the collaborative writing
of an authentic document, memo format,
nor some senseless example,
imaginary drivel from the textbook.

Next class, they proudly present me
with their document.
It has been eagerly sent to the Dean.
And my heart sinks at the misplaced modifiers,
the sentence fragments and the spelling errors.
The revolution has been lost in the proofing.

We begin again.

Rishma Dunlop

Biographical Note: Rishma Dunlop taught English literature and business writing at Okanagan University College from 1991-1994. Ms. Dunlop is currently a Phd candidate at the University of British Columbia where she is teaching in the Department of Language Education. Her research focus is in the domain of post-structural theories and their roles in the teaching of language and literature.

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Scorned Sources and Illegitimate Practices

The following essay was literally "put together" over 2 days during Inkshed 11 in Fredericton. We thought it would be of interest, particularly to those Inkshedders who are currently engaged in the longer-term collaborations set up for Inkshed 12. We acknowledge the justice of the virtually unanimous feeling in Fredericton that the collaborations there began much later than is usual -- and were in that sense "artificial." On the other hand, we really enjoyed the process of our collaboration, and are happy enough with the product to offer it here in Inkshed.

Practices considered illegitimate by the academy -- such as the unacknowledged use of quotation (or near-quotation), uncited summary, unacknowledged dependence on such scorned sources as Coles Notes -- may be better considered as necessary steps in development. The largely current view that these are crimes to be detected and punished denies that students have legitimate motivations. It conceives their behaviour only as deception or misrepresentation, rather than validating it as effort to develop, adopt, or adapt viable, legitimate strategies. It forces them into a position where

deception is necessary. As our fields move into electronic media, where access to and appropriation of others' works are relatively easy logistically, issues about acknowledgement and the ethics implied therein are becoming increasingly relevant. We must help students understand the issues and value them as they enter academic communities. By way of illustration, we will refer to specific student stories.

As one of us was walking back from a meeting about revised administrative procedures for cases of suspected plagiarism, he ran into one of his students from York's Centre for Academic Writing. She was interested in talking about plagiarism too, but from a very different perspective. She was one of about 40 students that he had seen last semester in the Centre. The only commonality among these students is that they are all highly motivated. This particular student was bright, mature and functioning well in her final year. As they walked along, she said "I just got back an essay -- I'm relieved I wasn't accused of plagiarism. I've been worried ever since I turned it in." What she had been worried about is the following. She had to write an essay that involved interpreting Plato's theory of the cave. She wasn't satisfied with her understanding of it from The Republic so she had read Coles Notes. She knew that her interpretation was informed by that source, and she had considered, but rejected, both citing it and including it in her bibliography. She had never seen a source like Coles in any academic paper and thought her work would be downgraded if she included it in hers.

This situation, we think, occupies a grey area. If a student in one of our classes had raised this issue, we'd have asked her how dependent she was on Coles' Notes. If, as was the case here, Coles had just served in give her a general context for interpreting the passage and she had made no specific use of the ideas or language then she probably needn't cite it. In other words, we'd classify what she got from Coles as "common knowledge" instead of "paraphrase." However, if the student raised the same issue during essay tutoring, we would likely have told her to explain the situation to whoever was going to mark the essay and to get that instructor's advice.

Instructors differ on this and another teacher might tell her to cite the relevant part of her essay as a paraphrase of Coles. We generally don't expect to see sources like Coles Notes in the bibliographies of student essays, but that may be because we understand student writing on the analogy of our own -- and this, like analogies in general, does not run on all four legs. Students are neophytes to our disciplines and they might well need sources like Coles as part of their initiation. When we tell students, either that they should or should not include such a source in the bibliography, we're translating the convention from our own writing situations to the students'. Different instructors might translate differently -- just as they might have different views on whether the analogy "on all four legs" above should be cited to Coleridge.

The issue here is not that in academia Coles Notes constitute a kind of bargain basement of secondary sources -- although of course they do and are even lower on the academic ladder than general encyclopedia articles. The issue is the kind of use this student made of that source. Its low status is a factor mainly because it prevented her from acknowledging a legitimate use of a source that was appropriate and helpful given her level of understanding and her need to forward that understanding.

Certainly not all the situations in which students might be accused of plagiarism are as ambiguous as the one above. There are, however, considerable complexities in students' use and documentation of sources. Our experience is that, even in the most extreme and seemingly obvious cases of plagiarism, there's some mixture of misunderstanding, lack of orientation to an academic environment and lack of skill.

Another student's story illustrates deceptive behaviour with a different motivation:

I am in grade eleven writing an essay on Manitoba's emergence as a province. I do not understand the politics so I find children's books at the public library; when I read these simple books, I understand and appreciate the concepts. No one has taught me this strategy and I use it secretly to disguise my ignorance. I want to write my paper so that it will be understandable, so I paraphrase the simple texts I find, melding their content into my own sequence. "A Plus" the teacher awards me, and tells me that I have a clear, lucid style. He tells me I should write children's books. When returning the paper he asks if he might put it in the library as a model for other students to peruse.

Although she was a top student, she recognized that she didn't understand what she was clearly supposed to. She

developed a useful strategy but was not allowed to acknowledge it, let alone celebrate it. She needed to protect her academic position, to avoid being considered too stupid to understand something at her grade level.

Alternately some students well understand the expectations, but, unable to meet them for whatever reasons, deliberately resort to deceptive behaviour. This point is well illustrated by one student's story:

Some of my perception of myself as fraud must stem from my initial attempts at essay writing in high school. In one incident, my best friend and I are writing grade ten geography papers for which we invent bibliographic references to supplement those we actually did find and use. We think we are clever, using existing publishers, mostly from Toronto. We know our teacher approves of scholarly activity and he writes 'Excellent bibliography!' on each of our papers.

Many students are initially confused by any expectation that they should cite sources. They will often respond with "Well, then every sentence needs a footnote, because everything in my essay has been said before." Most instructors have heard this from students, and we have some response to it. The question is how do such students hear our responses and how are they affected by them? A typical student's vision is that somewhere in that vast library there must be some dusty book with essentially the same idea which she just included in her essay. When we tell students about plagiarism, especially if we try to frighten them into academic honesty by discussing the seriousness of its nature and penalties, what they hear is an unreasonable expectation on our part that they check all those books to make sure that idea is not in there -- clearly an impossible task. What they may conclude is that the whole concept of documentation is either unreasonable incomprehensible or both.

Most students have discovered that it is a good idea to include some direct quotations and that they need to cite those. They will ask, "How many footnotes should I put on each page?" They mean, "How many direct quotations?" and the reason that "footnote" means "direct quotation" is that they just do not know that a paraphrase -- with a citation -- is a legitimate option. They then spice their (unacknowledged) paraphrases with a sprinkling of (acknowledged) direct quotations. Their sense of the writing process is one of changing the language in which the information is expressed because that's the only contribution that they can conceive of making. On this assumption, they cite only the direct quotations, not the paraphrases. The paraphrases are "theirs," only the direct quotations are "borrowed."

In response to what they see as the ambiguity of writing in university, they often translate the rules we give them into approximations which make sense from their perspective. One variation of this is a "rule" which we've heard from a number of students: "if you change every third word, you don't need a footnote." Again, the assumption here is that the only contribution a student can make is language change: a "borrowing" of ideas -- being inevitable -- needs no acknowledgement. All of this has a certain internal consistency; it's just not the one which we are looking for.

What do all those stories say to us? In some ways they say nothing new; we have all studied writing pedagogy and know its theory and practice. But revisiting our own experiences reminds us that we need regularly to gauge where we have come from and where we are going. We were certainly among the most academically successful of our schoolmates, yet we misunderstood so much of our schooling. We managed to learn in spite of it, but we know some of our young classmates were less fortunate, acquiring only a few skills and a negative self concept for their efforts. Some of our stories happened a long time ago, twenty, thirty, forty years ago; but variations of them are happening this very day in classrooms across our nation. We need to keep listening. Even more, we need to work hard at advocating classrooms from preschool though to university level where meaningful activity takes place, activity which students perceive as relevant to their own lives, classrooms where students understand teachers' expectations. We need to change the kinds of stories students tell.

James Brown, Kenna Manos, Pat Sadowy

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