Inkshed

A Canadian newsletter devoted to writing and reading theory and practice.
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This newsletter is offered to all educators in Canada interested in processes and pedagogies relating to language, language acquisition, and language use. A forum whose primary objective is to intensify the relationship between theory and practice, it serves both informative and polemical functions.

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The word is half his that speaks and half his that hears it. (Montaigne)

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Inkshed is distributed without cost to its subscribers. As far as possible, subscribers have free access to its pages. *Inkshed* publishes notices, announcements, reviews, cohort reports, commentaries, discussions of events, issues, problems, and questions of interest to academics in Canada interested in writing and reading theory and practice.

A Method for Teaching Adult Illiterates to Write

Can basic literacy skills be taught by teaching writing? I think they can. In this article I should like to share with you my experience as a volunteer working for an adult literacy organization called People, Words and Change. From September 1981 until May 1982 I was paired with a Canadian-born learner, working on a one-to-one basis for one hour each week in her home. While I myself had had no formal teaching experience, my learner had acquired some elements of literacy from three previous tutors. However, she was unable to read the newspaper or magazines, a telephone directory, a book, a recipe, or a letter; she was unable to write the days of the week, the months of the year, a grocery list, a cheque, a letter of any kind, or to fill in a form.

In order to bring a measure of formality and objectivity to a teaching situation that is essentially informal and strongly personal, the programme adopts the terms "tutor" and "learner"—and I have followed this practice here. My learner was a happily married woman with two young children. With few outside contacts, her leisure was spent either with her family or watching television soap operas with a neighbour; she enjoyed drawing as a hobby. In his book *Language and Education* (Longmans, 1966) F. D. Flower claims, "All language functions in a context" (p. 143), but the learner in this study lived in a context that lacked the written word; it was a context in which reading and writing were perceived as autonomous activities, unrelated to each other, and indeed, unrelated to her daily life. It was for this reason that I decided to introduce her to the Language Experience Technique.

The Language Experience Technique is a rather pedantic name for a simple method of teaching in which the learner dictates sentences to the tutor, who then types them and has the learner read them aloud. Thus the learner may draw on a familiar spoken vocabulary, and

translate an event or thought that interests her into textual form. Reading and comprehension are facilitated because memory and interest aid sight-reading. More significantly, the method enables the learner to conceive language as a context of personal experience. The tutor's interest in the text also gives the learner a fresh insight into the value of her experiences and of writing. Other beneficial aspects of the Language Experience Technique can be traced in its effects upon the learner in this study.

At first, the learner did not choose her own topics. Her very first dictated composition was elicited by asking her about her school days here in Ottawa. It runs,

> When I was a child at school they were all French teachers. Every morning we'd start by praying. And after every lesson we prayed--and prayed, and prayed! We did so much praying in that class.

When the learner heard the typed sentences read back to her she exclaimed with delight, "Why, that is my voice!", and she was anxious to read it for herself. This represented an important breakthrough. From then on a written text could be conceptualized as a "voice", content would be related to experience, and writing and reading would be integrated. In the event, she became more interested in writing than in reading, but this was countered by having her read *Starting Out*, a publication which includes compositions by adults in basic literacy programmes. This in its turn helped develop my learner's awareness of language. She observed that children "had their own language", that some writing had a "poetic" quality, and that her own writing could be "moving".

With this growing sensitivity to language, my learner was also extending the range of her subject matter; she began to list topics for herself and to rehearse her dictation. Typed compositions would be read aloud to her family and to her neighbour. Then, early in 1982, there was a subtle change. Her compositions became more subjective and self-reflective, more concerned with her feelings about the events in her life than with the events themselves. She began to explore the way her early life and schooling had affected her relationships with other people, and her values. At the same time, she began to note flaws in her mode of expression and to become more critical of her work.

Suddenly, without warning, in April 1982 my learner produced a composition written of her own volition and in her own hand. It had been prompted by the stress and unhappiness of a quarrel with her neighbour. The quarrel had evoked to consciousness a personal lifetime's experience of rejection, loneliness, and failure that my learner associated with her experiences at school and illiteracy. Taking these factors into account, the tutor decided to overlook the technical aspects of the composition and to focus rather upon its content. After some discussion, the learner said it surprised her to discover that although her experience had "haunted" her for many years, having written it she found she was now able to "put it away" and out of her mind.

She continued to write compositions that were spelled phonetically, punctuated haphazardly, and written in pencil. Family members helped her, but she was disturbed by her many spelling mistakes. This seemed an appropriate time to provide her with a simple dictionary and to teach its use. In turn, familiarity with the alphabetical format of the dictionary provided a basis for lessons on using the telephone directory, street maps, and an atlas. These skills, along with an improving vocabulary, contributed to the learner's self-confidence; spelling and punctuation became part of the ongoing process of writing and of understanding the writing of others.

Two important advances were made by the learner. The first occurred when, despite her nervousness, she volunteered to speak about her hobby (drawing) to a primary class in which her daughter was a pupil. A minor event, but it marked a growing consciousness of her ability to participate in a literate society. The second advance was an extension of this experience. Her tutor suggested the learner should re-write and submit an earlier composition about drawing to *Starting Out*. She learned that for this wider and unknown readership certain changes and explanations should be incorporated in her writing. Subsequently, when reading she was much more aware of a writer's ability, or failure, to meet her needs as a reader.

In teaching the illiterate adult it is obviously important to focus upon the learner's overall context of life, and upon the necessity to make writing and reading a part of that context. I hope I have shown here how writing enabled my learner to discover her own 'voice' and to develop a consciousness of the spoken and textual voices of others; it enabled her to integrate literacy skills with her everyday experiences; and through writing she learned that she had something of interest and value to communicate to her family, her community, and to the wider readership of *Starting Out*.

Teachers of illiterate adults can assume their students are fully articulate in oral language, though not able to read and write. I suggest that the kind of writing my learner did fosters literacy skills in an important way--partly because it serves to link spoken with written language, partly because it stimulates an interest in reading, but mostly because this kind of writing is an activity that itself integrates written language with the daily experience of the learner.

Audrey Watson
Carleton University

The Troubled Connection: Poison Inkshedding

I've received a poison inkshedding--slipped, in plain-brown wrapper and dark of night, silently, under the door to the *Inkshed* editorial offices--unsigned, of course, and constructed from scraps of text cut from a variety of cheap publications and pasted to a sheet of newsprint. Fredericton's Finest dusted for fingerprints and examined the document for other kinds of evidence, but--you will not be surprised--the culprit's identity remains hidden. What follows is a small sampling of the mostly-unprintable vituperations of the document's author:

> The 'trouble' *is* the 'connection', yet the foregone conclusion is that our 'real' goal is to devise whizzer and banger integrations rather than to seriously question the whole issue. . . . anyone can blab ad nauseum about *how* to teach comp and lit together, but who will be able to give intelligible reasons re *why* do it in the first place?

It will be interesting indeed to see if this malcontent will dare attend and unmask at our 'Composition and Literature: The Troubled Connection' working conference.

Inkshed Quotations Contest

One weekend a few months ago I decided this newsletter had been stuck for long enough with a title that (although it did a good job of abstracting what we were about) was unpronounceable and only barely recollectable. The title *Inkshed* resulted from a weekend's worth of looking, of research. First I dug up the word inkshed (in *Roget's Thesaurus*, by the way), and then I looked through various dictionaries--the *OED* among them, of course--and concordances for definitions and quotations using the word. Now, however, I've run out of quotations.

I therefore issue this challenge to you: Let us see you put your literary, linguistic, lexicographical, philological, imaginative, and investigative skills to work to discover, invent, and generate a new batch of inkshed quotations.

You generate them, I'll print them--one or more each issue, depending upon how many I get. Perhaps some time next academic year we can have a run-off of some sort, to determine an overall winner (if we do, what should be the prize, and who will put it up?), but in the meantime you'll have to settle for adding a publication to your CV rather than money to your pocketbook.

Send submissions to: **The Judges (c/o J. Reither)**
***Inkshed* Quotations Contest**
St. Thomas University
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Deconstructing the Institution of English

For what seems decades, the tide of opinion among connoisseurs of conferences has been running strongly against what might be called the 'forty-minutes-of-read-paper-and-ten-minutes-of-desultory-selfconscious-questions' model. In general, though, associations of university English teachers have been the King Canutes of academia, and although some change is visible, even at the annual meetings of ACUTE, the full-hour session remains what one might call the 'default mode'.

This fact alone would make the March 24-25 conference on 'English as an Institution' organized by Heather Murray and Norm Feltes of York University remarkable, for the conference was about as far from that model as it's possible to get. Perhaps this was affected by the fact that the meeting was conceived at the ACUTE meetings last spring in Vancouver.

Murray and Feltes' basic organizational structure was a thrice-repeated motif of small group discussion followed by a plenary session (also primarily group discussion). There were no papers, no panels, no presentations of any kind, and even the designated group facilitators ('felicitators,' Norm Feltes called them at the last session in a felicitous slip of the tongue) were--at least in the groups I was involved in--nicely unobtrusive.

The rhythm of the conference was thoughtfully worked out. On Saturday morning each registrant was involved in one of a list of eight 'workshops,' each designated by a concep-

tual category and a specific focus. A list of the eight workshops--the same eight were repeated in an afternoon session, so each registrant had a chance to engage with two of the topics--may give an idea of the sort of stance the conference organizers took, one almost as courageous and unconventional as their jettisoning of formal papers:

The Canon: Canadian Literature
Criticism: New Critical Theory
Curriculum: The Boundaries of Teaching
Discipline: 'English' or 'Cultural Studies'
Government: Defending the Humanities
Profession: Part-Time Professionals
Scholarship: The Functions of Publication
Text: The Theatrical Text

After each workshop there was a meeting of facilitators, who reported on the discussion in the various groups; then Heather Murray presented an elegant synthesis of those reports to a plenary session. On Sunday morning, workshops were organized around specific texts--*To the Lighthouse*, for instance, or *Endgame*, or an Ontario Department of Education white paper. Norm Feltes summarized these discussions and stimulated what turned out to be a most exciting last plenary session.

Although this method of organization posed some problems, the advantages over more conventional methods of conference organizing are worth considering. By Sunday afternoon the questions and issues had stopped being polite and general and had begun to engage people and call forth real concern. And what had developed as the conference's central concerns--the definition and nature (and desirability) of a 'canon' of literary texts, the role of literary theory in classrooms, and the institutional (and perhaps paradigmatic) crisis faced by the profession--had begun to be defined in clear and powerful terms.

There are, however, risks in such a procedure. One is built into group discussion. In conversation, we all want to be agreeable, and to engage in what Richard Rorty calls 'normal discourse.' Discussion always has a tendency to push us, in the last minutes of a scheduled time, toward closure and toward generalizations which are vague enough and at a level high enough that we can all, with sage nods, agree with them. Even the most unreconstructed Matthew-Arnoldian essentialist, the most aggressively iconoclastic deconstructionist, the most dogged Marxist, and the most airy-fairy educational theorist can usually be brought to agree (for instance) that 'we need to question the canon.'

Under that social pressure toward comfortable closure, we all tend to overlook the fact that we mean radically different things by such statements. The essentialist might mean, for example, that we need to apply our critical intelligence to the works which are part of our mutually agreed cultural heritage; the deconstructionist that there's no reason to privilege traditional literature, since it's no more or less subject to deconstruction than the newspaper or rock videos; the Marxist that the canon is nothing more than an artifact of the social function of English studies and thus its contents need to be radically revised; and the educationist that the very concept of the canon leads us to conceive of our role in terms of a list of works rather than a set of rationally decided goals. At the end of an hour's discussion, though, only someone determined to be contrary will be likely to insist on such fundamental differences.

More considered statements by formal presenters might generate productive disagreement

more powerfully--though it must be admitted that it doesn't work very well in the traditional format of academic conferences. There are other methods: I suspect, for example, that simply writing things down, even in the most tentative and exploratory way, would have something of this effect. Such radical differences in our profession need to be confronted, and precisely by the kinds of people who come to conferences like this one.

Talking about teaching, after all, is one of the hardest things we do. This is partly because we need to be so remorselessly reflexive, but also because the language we have access to for talking and thinking about it is so limited. We keep slipping into metaphors drawn from other fields ("decentering," "reading," and so on) and--even more dangerously --generalizations. We don't have a language to occupy the space between what concretely *happens* in classes and in the process of reading, and the synthetic positions we consciously hold (about, for example, the role of literature in the world, the relationship between criticism and literary texts, and the ideology of the classroom structure). If for no other reason, this conference was a landmark because it went so far toward helping its participants forge such a language.

Attendance at the conference represented two patterns which our profession might think about, as well. On the one hand, the current round of financial panics in postsecondary institutions seems to have made travel money even harder to come by than usual, and so the conference was perhaps unfortunately dominated by people (and thus concerns) local to Toronto and even to York University. On the other, the conference went a long way toward breaking out of the shell by which university English teachers talk only to university English teachers: teachers from community colleges, part-timers, graduate students, and other constituencies were powerfully represented.

What is probably most important about this conference, however, is its position as a daring precedent. We need more such opportunities to talk in a sustained and serious way about the issues the profession's confronting. It's in such contexts that important ideas arise, not in annual meetings of hide-bound scholarly organizations dedicated to the preservation of a leaky but comfortable *status quo*.

Russell A. Hunt
St. Thomas University

Cohort Report: A Course in Prose Structures for Engineering Students

A first-year course entitled "Prose Structures in Everyday English" for engineering students at Queen's University, Kingston, is now in its second year, and will become a half course credit next year. This elective course has attracted more students than expected and enrolment had to be limited this term.

The course is a study of the structure, style and word choice of selected examples of contemporary English writing and speech within a consistent theoretical framework similar to the Setting and Exposition-Complication-Resolution-Denouement framework for the analysis of plays and novels. The basis for the course has appeared in numerous recent publications, notably "Short Texts to Explain Problem-Solution Structures" (*Instructional Science*, 9 [1980], 221-252), which won the NCTE best article reporting formal research award for 1982.

There is also relevant discussion in M. P. Hoey's *On the Surface of Discourse* (George Allen and Unwin, 1983). The instructional material itself is about to be published by the course instructor as *Rhetoric of Everyday English Prose* (George Allen and Unwin).

The course instructor, Michael P. Jordan, specializes in coherence between clauses and sentences in everyday English use. His second book, also due out this year (Krieger), deals with systems of lexical cohesion within and between sentences, and he is currently working on two others dealing with clause relations and clear writing principles. His work has been received in publications dealing with linguistics, business communication, instructional science, ESL and technical writing.

Michael P. Jordan
Queen's University

Query: What Are We Really Teaching?

I have a problem I would like to share, and to which someone may have an interesting solution. The question is a Coleridgean one about the relation between the part and the whole in English Studies. It occurred to me when I was reading William McNeill's *The Shape of European History* (Oxford U.P., 1974). It is easy to transfer the problem from history to the study of language and literature.

> It is a matter of some importance to link teaching and research, even very detailed research, to an acceptable architectonic vision of the whole. Without such connections, detail becomes mere antiquarianism. Yet while history without detail is inconceivable, without an organizing vision it quickly becomes incomprehensible. (p. 4)

McNeill suggests that more effort has been put into attacking the old large-scale hypotheses than in developing new ones. The result, he says,

> is all too often to reduce professional historical study to trifling elaboration of questions that interest only a small circle of fellow-specialists within the profession and leave everybody else cold. Erudition of this kind, unconnected with any vivacious hypotheses in which men really believe and upon which they are prepared to act or pass judgment on new experience, is usually dull and is always unimportant. (p. 5)

I have underlined the formula which I find especially striking.

What "vivacious hypotheses" are our English programs based on? What hypotheses provide the unity for courses which we give single-handedly and have pretty complete control over? I don't have clear answers for my own teaching, and I think I am not unusual in this. I would not expect any general agreement among teachers of English about what we are doing. What bothers me is that there is not even any identifiable *disagreement*, because we pay so little attention to this question.

Has anyone any suggestions?

Stephen Bonnycastle
Royal Military College

It's a Funny Thing (Idle End-of-Semester Thoughts on Teaching Writing)

1. In recognition of the great variety and range of error present in any given group of students, I usually attempt to individualize my comments on grammar. In other words, I mention subject/verb agreement, pronoun reference, or parallelism to only those students whose written work shows they need it. Occasionally, in an effort to save some time (a precious resource for teachers of writing), I will speak to a whole class about some rule or convention which a sufficient number of students are transgressing.

One such rule concerns the pronoun it and the use and abuse to which it's (its?) subjected. When, on the first assignment, as many as seven or eight students use its instead of the contraction, or form the possessive by adding 's (the overgeneralization of perfectly correct form), I explain the variations and hope that the subject is closed.

Although I've never made an exact count, it always seems that by the second assignment as many as twelve or more students are confusing the its. Suddenly, students who had never thought twice about it are frozen by indecision. Where once their written work had contained confident spaces and bold apostrophes between the t and the s, now the letters are joined and, just to be safe, a barely discernable mark hovers above and between them. No longer is it possible to circle the error and correct it; now it's a judgment call.

Does this happen to anyone else? Admittedly, my evidence is hardly empirical (these are idle thoughts, after all), but whenever it happens, or whenever I think it happens, a few questions come to mind. Is my explanation so confusing, or is it possible to teach error by drawing attention to the rule? While I avoid the dreary and probably detrimental exercises which ask students to 'correct the errors in the following sentences,' I wonder how much even personalized comments on grammar disrupt some fragile balance of usage. If it were only the its/it's confusion, I wouldn't be so concerned, but the mere context of the writing classroom, and our presence in it as 'experts', often appears to be more hindrance than help. Why does it sometimes take me all semester to stop students, who speak simply and clearly, from writing clumsy and padded 'formal' language? (See Mimi Schwartz's article on student and faculty perceptions of writing in the January 1984 *College English*).

2. Another reason I individualize grammar instruction is my belief that most of my students have adequate control of language. While they don't know what gerunds are, they rarely use them incorrectly. To dramatize this difference between knowledge and use, I ask students who know the difference between transitive and intransitive verbs to raise their hands.

Expecting no hands, I am always shocked to see a few raised. What I have come to realize is that, invariably, those students who raise their hands speak English as a second (or third) language. Just as invariably, their knowledge of the rules does not help them use the language correctly: they can define a gerund, but they can't use it properly.

One problem these second language students face is that their knowledge of rules, most often hammered home in ESL courses, allows for no exceptions. The native speakers of English, on the other hand, have only the vaguest recollection of grammar rules. They cannot explain why something is wrong, but they can 'hear' correct use.

3. Although most writing teachers now recognize that the separate-skills approach to teaching writing is ineffective, I wonder if we haven't traded one fragmentation of language for

a new one. Textbooks which divided written discourse into the sentence, the paragraph, and the essay are disappearing, to be replaced by "writing process" textbooks which carve up the activity of writing into strategies. Even three-stage models of writing are now considered insufficient to account for a complex and recursive writing process. But are we any better off with intricate, cognitive-process models of writing if, when translated into classroom practice, these models produce vast repertoires of discrete strategies with no apparent homogeneity? Are students leaving our courses with a confusing collection of techniques for generating and organizing ideas, analyzing problems and audience, and combining sentences, but with no organic sense of what writing is or how to go about it? Have they internalized the strategies so that they can recognize exceptions to the rules provided by our explanations and assignments? In other words, can they "hear" their own writing processes well enough to know when something is wrong and to adapt our own strategies to the real-world writing requirements outside the classroom?

What we want to encourage is a writing habit of mind--a way of thinking without seams between, for instance, the generation of ideas and the analysis of audience. But I worry when I look at my students' rough work and see a page of ideas about their audience and a separate page listing what they know about the topic. Without a strong sense of the way the one page transforms the other, our students may well end up with a knowledge about writing strategies that is as useless as the out-of-context skills we used to teach.

Anthony Paré
McGill University

Notice

This is the final issue of *Inkshed* for this academic year. Should any of you wish to contact me over the summer--and I hope I'll hear from many of you--this is my schedule:

Until mid-May: here in Fredericton
Mid-May until mid-June: Europe
Mid-June until 1st August: **C/O General Delivery**
Aitkin, MN U.S.A. 56431
After 1st August: back in Fredericton
August 17-19: Composition and Literature: The Troubled Connection
August 19-24: CCTE 1984 (Come ye all!)

If you have access to a computer with a modem, and if you subscribe to The Source Information Service, I can be reached (and materials for *Inkshed* can be sent to me) "electronically". My Source ID number is STJ687.

Have a good and productive summer. We've much to do, much to tell each other. Please keep in touch. The submissions deadline for next issue of this newsletter, scheduled for publication September 15th, is September 5th, but you can send material at any time.

Jim Reither