

# Inkshed

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A Canadian newsletter devoted to writing and reading theory and practice.  
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We should have a great many fewer disputes in the world if words were taken for what they are, the signs of our ideas only, and not the things themselves.

John Locke.

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## *Inkshed*

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- 5 September, deadline for publication 15 September
- 20 October, for 1 November
- 5 December, for 15 December
- 20 January, for 1 February
- 5 March, for 15 March
- 20 April, for 1 May

*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.

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## Surveying Writing Programs in Canada: A Request for Assistance

Michael Moore (Wilfrid Laurier University) has agreed to undertake for us a much-needed new descriptive survey of post-secondary writing programs in Canada. He will design, find funding for, and circulate a detailed questionnaire covering junior and senior courses, organization, pedagogy, staffing, texts, atmosphere, and so forth. The form will go out to program coordinators or other interested and knowledgeable people, not (as with some past surveys) to departmental chairpersons. There are three ways in which *you* can help *now*:

1. If you have specific suggestions about the format or content of the questionnaire itself, send them to Mike *immediately*.
2. If you consider yourself or someone else to be best able to receive and complete the questionnaire on behalf of your own program (or nonprogram!), let Mike know *immediately*.
3. If you are already engaged in surveying anything closely related to this subject, tell Mike about it so he can avoid duplication.

The address for these or other kinds of input is

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## Announcement: CCTE Journals.

The following motion was passed, unanimously, by the CCTE Executive at a meeting held during the Annual Conference, Fredericton, 23 August 1984:

That CCTE institute and maintain an editorial policy that results in *English Quarterly* focusing on the study and *Highway One* focusing on the teaching of English at all levels and in all of its aspects; that the emphasis in articles published in *English Quarterly* shall be upon scholarship, research, and theory, and the emphasis in articles in *Highway One* shall be upon the application of scholarship, research, and theory to classroom practice; that *English Quarterly* shall be a refereed journal; and that this policy shall take effect with the appointment of the next editors.

It was made clear that the province of both *English Quarterly* and *Highway One* will continue to be "English"—writing, reading, and oracy—but the primary aim of *EQ* will be to advance knowledge of writing, reading, and oracy, while the primary aim of *Hwy 1* will be to advance the teaching of writing, reading, and oracy. Articles in *EQ* should be similar in tone and stance to the kinds of articles currently published in such journals as *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *Research in the Teaching of English*; articles in *Hwy 1* should be similar in tone and stance to those published in *English Journal*, *Language Arts*, and *English Education*. The CCTE Executive hope to make *EQ* "a strong voice of leadership" not only in Canadian but also in international English scholarship and research. The primary function of *Hwy 1* will be to "bring out the practical implications of sound research and theory in a way that directly addresses the professional needs and interests of practicing teachers at all levels."

A call for applications for the editorship of *English Quarterly* will be forthcoming within the next few months.

James A. Reither

## Thanks—and a Testimonial

Last winter I requested through *Inkshed* the help of colleagues in my need for information about writing competency testing in universities in Canada. Several of you took the time and trouble to send me most useful materials, and I use *Inkshed* again to thank you all most warmly. My experience proves that this newsletter indeed serves its professed function of linking members of a community in a two-way communication; thus thanks to Jim Reither again for *Inkshed*. Let's continue to use it as well as receive it.

Susan Drain  
Mount Saint Vincent University

## No More Higher Order Reasoning in Chicago

It is worthwhile to reflect on the University of Chicago's 'Institute of Writing, Meaning, and Higher Order Reasoning' offered last May for what we can learn about teaching writing more effectively and about organizing a productive conference. First, the pedagogy.

Although Piaget's and, increasingly, Vygotsky's work on early cognitive development is well known to educators, more recently Perry and others have identified cognitive, ethical, and affective developmental stages for college-age students. An understanding of students' capacity for critical thinking is an obvious and useful starting point for designing writing assignments and for helping students with writing problems. For example, if students are dualist thinkers who judge everything as either right or wrong, then a planned sequence of activities will help them work through an assignment which calls for balancing several theories or approaches to a problem. While the developmental perspective was the institute's predominant focus, several presenters evaluated both its strengths and its weaknesses. Thus, for example, in the concluding presentation Ann Berthoff criticized an approach which merely counts behavioral responses in writing and deliberately ignores the meaning—as one study she cited did.

Since many of us at one time or another are involved with organizing conferences, it might also be useful to consider the organization of the institute. Perhaps the simplest yet most effective strategy was to mail readings (200 pages) on the major themes of the institute to participants a month prior to the conference. Thus participants were able to integrate new information, become oriented to the main concepts, and formulate questions. Once the institute began, there was a variety of presentational modes. In the plenary sessions leading scholars and teachers from a variety of academic backgrounds presented papers to the entire group. In smaller workshops and presentations more specialized topics were offered concurrently; the problem here, however, was choosing among God's plenty. Finally, through small group discussions, participants met colleagues from other institutions and examined the ideas presented in the lectures, workshops, and the photocopied articles. The only thing lacking was the chance to explore ideas in writing—known to some as inkshedding.

This was the last institute focusing on this particular theme, but from November 15–18 the University of Chicago will offer a fifth national institute on another topic of current interest, 'Critical Thinking and the Formation of Values: An Emerging Agenda for the Discipline.' This institute will explore the relationships among the goals of liberal learning, intellectual development, and effective teaching. More information can be obtained from

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## Commentary

Re: Russell Hunt's 'Literature is Reading is Writing,' *Inkshed* 2:6, 5-8.

*Inkshed* readers will be interested in the only "hard" study I know which searched for significant covariance between a proven improvement in reading and improved writing skills. The research was done in 1978 as Joseph Belanger's dissertation for the Ph.D. in Education at the University of Alberta, and I was fortunate to be asked to serve as a member of the examining committee. The study, entitled "Reading Skills as an Influence on Writing Skills", was statistically valid and the results reliable. Cautiously put, the conclusion finds *no* statistically significant link between improved reading and any improvement in writing. (It is possible, for example, that there is some need for increasing the latency between reading improvement and retesting for writing improvement.) Still, this is the best test I know of of the hypothesis that Hunt writes about. And, unlike the opining of English department types and the bumpf of anthology editors, this study is not based on anecdote, speculation, and tradition. I hold out little hope that fact will ever outface tradition in the haunts of my own beloved Department of English, but I often cite Belanger's research to challenge, at least, the holders of cherished belief. Chris Bullock and I, and a very few others, are at pains to question pedagogy that insists on the tacit acceptance of unexamined canons. Personally, I believe that teaching the art of great writers and expecting that to have a one-to-one effect on the writing of first year university students is exactly like taking a beginning university drawing class through the Louvre and then saying, "Something like that is what we have in mind. Go to it." The best will be properly abashed; the worst will, God help us, think they can do it.

Belanger's research is available through University Microfilms. It is also in *DAI* for 1978-79.

James G. Marino  
University of Alberta

## The Troubled Connection

On behalf of the organizing committee for the *Inkshed* conference on "Composition and Literature: The Troubled Connection," I'd like to thank, in this public forum, those who came to Fredericton and St. Thomas University for that gathering. The energy and quality of the proceedings was, in my mind, dazzling. It is difficult for those of us who organized the conference to tell to what extent the conference was a success, but this much we know: Our community has grown a bit--in size and in our sense of who we are. It could not have happened without the enthusiasm, intelligence, and commitment of the forty-some people who trusted us enough to attend. We thank you all.

Watch, now, for announcements and calls for proposals for "Inkshed II", tentatively planned for Edmonton, Alberta, next May (just prior to the 1985 COTE Annual Meeting).

Jim Reither

## Writing Competency Testing, 1984: A Report on a Survey of Canadian Universities

In an effort to prevent my own university, in its enthusiasm to assist the writing development of its students, from reinventing the wheel, and to provide information about other universities' experience, in the spring of 1984 I surveyed Canadian universities to find out about writing competency testing programmes in Canada. This survey was remarkable initially for its *chutzpah*, in that it requested a great deal of information; it turned out then to be equally remarkable in the response, both in numbers and in thoroughness, that it evoked. Of the fifty-one anglophone or bilingual member institutions of AUCC to which it was sent, twenty-seven returned informative replies, a proportion even more remarkable when one realizes that several of the fifty-one were colleges which shared the practices of larger institutions.

Fifteen institutions reported the administration of a writing competency test, and the survey results were reported in a paper presented to CCTE in August in Fredericton. Copies are available directly from me. An edited version of the paper's conclusion, however, is printed below. Please note that with so small a group as fifteen, especially when the group is subdivided, the numbers quickly become useless for statistical purposes: one cannot make predictions or even generalize safely on this basis, so the statements below refer strictly to the experiences of the responding institutions.

### Summary of Patterns

1. Most of the programs reported on have been instituted in the last five years.
2. Most of the reporting institutions make their writing test a requirement either for graduation or for continued registration.
3. The most frequent test type is either an essay or an essay-*précis* combination. Assessment is most frequently some version of a holistic procedure.
4. Standards of acceptable performance are generally hard to define or even to describe. Correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation are not the *sine qua non* of most tests.
5. Requirement regulations apply fairly uniformly to student populations: only students with evidence of competence (degree or transfer credit) and occasional part-time students are commonly exempted.
6. Most institutions do not have an exact idea of how much the testing actually costs.
7. Testers tend to praise the test they use. Those using objective or standardized tests value objectivity, reliability, and validity; those using essay tests speak highly of their direct relation to writing tasks and to the campus situation.

### The Justification of Testing

The survey asked about the practice rather than the theory of testing, and this did not encourage respondents to discuss fundamental assumptions or philosophical issues. Still, several claims were made. First, it was felt that testing raises student awareness of the importance of good writing; second, testing informs students of their performance relative to the university's expectations; and third, testing provides a solid basis for student advising and

placement. No one claimed that testing contributes directly or indirectly to actual improvement in student performance. One non-testing institution, Simon Fraser, took the trouble to explain why there was no writing competency test there. The English Department has long argued against such a practice on 'philosophical grounds'. Briefly, they argue that 'no one or two hour examination can adequately assess an individual's writing' and that 'an approach which punishes students for educational deficiencies over which they have no control is not compatible with the philosophical values of a university'.

Behind the whole debate, of course, is the question of which is the more useful focus for those who are interested in helping students improve their writing: the process of composition, or the product of that process. Obviously, a test uses a product as its starting point, and instruction may then tend to focus on the qualities of that product rather than on the way by which that product came to be. It may, however, be argued that, realistically, it is products upon which students are judged, upon which all of us who write are judged, and that the test is then an appropriate task. Certainly the test itself does not necessarily mean that student instruction following the test cannot be process- focussed.

#### Five Issues, One Recommendation

1. Adequate funding, efficient administration, and some recognition of the labours of those involved are important, particularly in the long-term.

2. The question of the value of compulsory measures lurks behind several responses. A compulsory test is likely to ensure consistency and make information available to the greatest number of students. Generally, there seems to be a reluctance to make a student's follow-up course of action a compulsory one.

3. A third issue is political, both within and without a university. To what extent is testing perceived as a criticism of high schools? How may all educational levels co-operate to ensure that students are well-prepared to meet university demands? Might a testing programme have an impact on university enrolment? What is the proper administrative home for a testing programme--an academic department such as English? or Student Services? To what extent does testing involve or affect faculty or staff other than those directly responsible for it? Is there an argument for a test developed or administered at arms'- length?

4. The last question leads to the next issue, the relationship between the testing programme and the university as a whole. Though politically it might be safer to have standard practice and measures, it might be instructionally more effective to have a test which is relevant to a university's particular needs, and can be integrated into the university programme of writing development, both through writing courses and the involvement of all faculty.

5. Finally, the issue of standards cannot be ignored, as it is related to several of the above concerns. If a compulsory writing requirement is instituted, then standards must be established, whereas if tests are diagnostic, the need to decide and define a standard is removed. To what reference point is that standard to be related--an internal? or an external? The setting of a standard which high school graduates may not be able to meet has political implications. It is on this issue that I express a view of my own, founded partly on principle, and partly on the experience of others.

Standards need to be related not to an abstract, outside reference point, but to the actual expectations students will face in their chosen university. To achieve a focus on the

requirements for university writing at the introductory level, for example, would require examining the actual situation at the university. What do professors--and not just English professors--expect, and what can they *reasonably* expect of their first-year students?

The advantages of an increased dialogue and co-operation between English and other departments are three-fold: first, the more we can involve faculty members in assessment procedures, the more likely we are to have effective evaluation based on real standards. Second, increased interdepartmental involvement is likely to decrease suspicion about the trustworthiness of the testing process. It is unfortunate but true, I think, that the predominance of English teachers among markers, particularly those who teach the writing courses to which the pass standard of the test may be tied, means that the standards of judgment may be seen either as the esoterica of the English department or as the product of years of experience in reading and evaluating student essays. Grading may be seen as a mystery, particularly when its standard cannot be easily defined. Furthermore, a psychologist trained in testing and measurement may look askance at tests which obviously lack means and standard deviations. Actual experience with a holistic assessment process may allay such suspicions. The final advantage is that such involvement will mean that writing competency is less likely to be relegated to a motherhood statement in the calendar, and an unappreciated burden on the English department. Instead, it should encourage the ongoing participation of all faculty in writing improvement, in all courses and at all levels.

#### Final Note

Although the advantages and disadvantages of writing competency testing will be debated, sometimes hotly, for some time yet, the actual experience of those who have tried it does cast a useful light on both the philosophical and pragmatic questions. There is, after all, both moral support and useful advice to be acquired from our colleagues: the reaffirmation of that truth is perhaps as valuable as any of the facts that have been uncovered and brought together in this exercise.

Susan Drain  
Mount Saint Vincent University

## Inksheddings

One difference between "Composition and Literature: The Troubled Connection" and other conferences was that participants not only talked, they also wrote (anonymously)--for themselves and to the rest of us--after every session but the last. What they wrote was excerpted and "published" (typed up, photocopied, and distributed) at more or less frequent intervals during the conference. Proceedings commenced Friday evening with introductions and an overview of the conference provided by session presenters. Then conferees were asked to write for fifteen minutes, responding to things that had been said during the overview and defining their own expectations and goals for the conference. What follows on the next page, then, are excerpts from five of the excerpts from those first "inksheddings".

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As a teacher of a combined literature & composition course for freshman students, I find that after two years of genuine effort, I can boast of no clearly apprehended success. I am convinced that the students who showed improvement would have done just as well if I had handed them the texts at the beginning of the year & said, "Go do it."

My requirements for this conference, therefore, are quite simple. I want to be able to learn about (and experience through the Inkshedding sessions) the writing process from the perspective of a student, or learner, rather than that of a teacher (although, of course, the two categories need not be mutually exclusive.) I want to know what the hell I'm doing wrong.

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Partly I question how really important the literature and composition question is—or, at least, what's behind that question—since it seems every one of us is waging a different kind of battle in our departments—and for some of us claiming there's a link may be a strong political move, while in departments like my own people who don't want to teach writing are the ones who insist the only way to teach writing is through teaching literature. So is the literature and composition question anything more than a political one? Personally I've always found the teaching of literature a product-orientated and hierarchical process and if someone would show me how to teach literature as if a real living writer, who made choices, even mistakes, wrote it, in a way that connected with the way students might make writing choices, or mistakes, then the question might have more relevance.

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I believe there are two different issues here—the connection between reading and writing (the untroubled connection) and the connection between literature and composition (the troubled connection). I had assumed the topic of the conference would be the former. Now I am concerned (and troubled) just as much about the latter. Obviously, there are two different sets of issues; I wonder whether we can keep them apart.

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How did we slip from the connection between reading and writing, which on several levels must be sound, to the connection between literature and writing? Why this synecdoche: literature for reading?

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Where the connection seems to me most untroubled is on the level of experience. At the fuzzy level of theory and the political level of pedagogy, the link is not so clear. But in my experience, and I believe in the experience of many others, the acts of reading and writing gratify in some of the same ways. The discovery and surprise of the writing I'm doing right now is very like the learning that happens when I read.