Inkshed

Inside Inkshed

I am writing to members of my own community of knowledgeable peers.   My readers and I (I suppose) are guided in our work by the same set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as a question, what counts as an answer, what counts as a good argument in support of that answer or a good criticism of it.   I judge my essay finished when I think it conforms to that set of conventions and values.   And it is within that set of conventions and values that my readers will evaluate the essay, both in terms of its quality and in terms of whether or not it makes sense.

Kenneth A. Bruffee, "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind',"
in *Writing Centers: Theory and Administration,*
ed. G. A. Olson (NCTE, 1984), pp. 8–9.

Inkshed

What Do We Mean By Process?

The Second *Inkshed* Working Conference

at

The University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta
Sunday morning through Tuesday morning, 12–14 May 1985

Deadline for proposals (7–8 sessions, plus inksheddings): *15 January 1985.*
Deadline for registration (limited to 35–50; information to follow): *1 March 1985*

AIM

At the first *Inkshed* conference in Fredericton, August 1984, we agreed our next conference would explore the process approach to teaching writing and reading. The aims of the Edmonton conference will thus be to clarify values implicit in a commitment to process and to explore relationships between these values and various forms the process approach can take.

KINDS OF PROPOSALS

We are asking for proposals focusing on process as it relates to the following concerns:

(1) Our assumptions about what we are doing when we teach reading (including the reading of literature) or writing. Are we imparting knowledge of a cultural tradition or an academic discipline? Are we developing skills? Are we doing both, or neither?

(2) Our pedagogies. What does teaching writing and reading as process actually involve?

(3) Our sense of our professional roles as researchers, scholars, writers, members of academic institutions. Do we see ourselves as part of the process or as somehow outside it, a disinterested observer? How can we become more conscious of our place in the process?

(4) Our political ideologies, on institutional and social levels. What are the political implications of a process approach to teaching? Whose interests are we serving? How can we best accomplish our goals within the constraints of our individual teaching situations? To what extent do institutional constraints mirror the demands of the society as a whole?

(5) Our conception of human nature and the nature of human intelligence. In adopting a process approach to teaching, are we assuming that there is one best method for teaching everybody, if only we could find it? Are we participating in the broader social rejection of linear, analytic thinking in favour of holistic, relational thinking? If so, should we be?

METHODS

We would like sessions that are process–oriented in their mode of presentation as well as in their content. We will therefore welcome demonstrations of teaching methods, informal reports on work in progress, and collaborative learning situations, as well as formal papers.

Though some sessions will focus on the practical and concrete, we will ask presenters to link their talks to the kinds of theoretical and philosophical concerns suggested above.

Proposals should include name(s), address(es), phone number(s); title of proposed session, brief (200 words) description or abstract, brief description of method, and a statement of the aim or purpose of the session. Write to:

Chris Bullock / Kay Stewart
Inkshed Conference
Department of English
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Reading as Rewriting/Revision as Rereading

As Russell Hunt (*Inkshed* 2:6, 5-8) noted, there has been a remarkable shift not only in the conceptualization of writing as a communicative process, but also in our thinking about the reading process. In a well-intentioned commentary on Hunt's piece, however, James Marino (*Inkshed* 3:4, 4) leads us in a diversionary search for a 'statistically significant link between improved reading and an improvement in writing.' I say 'diversionary' because I suspect that what Hunt offers is more than a mere hypothesis, subject to empirical verification. As I read it, Marino's commentary focuses on the entrenched views of 'English department types . . . and anthology editors.' Lost in the shuffle, though, is Hunt's simple premise that reading and writing are interrelated cognitive, linguistic, and social processes.

Hunt and Marino share a mutual distrust of traditional English departmental dogma that the study of literary texts in and of itself engenders quality writing. This argument, that students best learn to write through some kind of mystical osmosis, continues to plague attempts to institute effective writing programs. The 'models model' referred to by Hunt is a recurrent curricular issue, initially confronted by Dewey and Thorndike over eighty years ago. Training in the classics, the story goes, is alleged to 'transfer' to other domains.

But I think Marino's demand for statistical proof leads us away from Hunt's principal concern: the parallels between the reading and writing processes. Hunt draws our attention to research on reading as a knowledge constitutive process. Cognitive psychologists (e.g., Kintsch, van Dijk, R. C. Anderson, Rumelhart) and psychologists (e.g., F. Smith, Goodman and Goodman) have indicated that fluid reading is a constructive act. 'Top down' or, as Smith puts it, 'inside out' explanations of the reading process enable us to see how readers use what they know to make sense of texts. The parallels with reader response and subjective criticism are obvious: by both accounts, readers *mediate* texts; they are recast as arbiters of meaning.

Contrast this version of reading with the behaviourist model which historically has dominated early reading, curriculum instruction, and evaluation. According to Thorndike, Sandiford, Gray, and others, reading was a response to controllable textual stimulus: the reader was conceived of as a decoder of textual symbols. Not surprisingly, these 'bottom up' or 'text driven' theories resemble the New Criticism of Wellek and Warren, et al. A kind of textual determinism is at work here: the text is 'right' and readers' idiosyncratic interpretations are cancelled.

If indeed reading is a top down, or at least interactive, process—then the reader is engaged in recomposition, in revision. Using the linguistic cues of the text, the reader *infers* on the basis of prior knowledge and experience. The reader is simultaneously 'forward inferencing', reconstructing what s/he has read and knows on the basis of new information. To critically understand a text, then, requires the reader to *rewrite* the text, using what is on the page in concert with what s/he knows about lexis, syntax, and discourse structure—as well as with more general background knowledge—to construct an interpretation.

The parallels with the writing process are obvious: rewriting, revising, and editing are essential elements of effective writing. To become effective writers, students must comprehend their own texts, reconstructing these texts on the basis of what they know about language, the task at hand, audience, and, of course, their own experience. Revision is, in this sense, an interactive process similar to reading: a rhetorical (and psycholinguistic) guessing game. Not surprisingly, the kinds of questions we use in conferencing, as part of revision heuristics, are very much akin to the questions we generate to enhance comprehension. There is, then, an

obvious cognitive and linguistic link between reading comprehension and effective revision. Both require that the reader/writer reconstruct a textual message. Neither reader nor writer proceeds simply on the basis of what s/he confronts on the page: both must become fluid at using background knowledge and an understanding of the task to make meaning.

In this sense, Hunt's argument—that 'literature is reading is writing'—is tenable to the extent that it doesn't license a traditional prioritization of literature study over writing instruction. And this seems to be Marino's main concern. Yet Hunt is observant enough to remind us that 'we can't expect writing to improve just because we *require* reading' (my emphasis), as the English department types referred to by Marino might. The improvement of writing via the teaching of reading depends not on what we require but on how we teach: on whether by 'teaching reading' we mean the teaching of literature in a manner that casts readers as active participants in criticism, and encourages them to draw upon what they know. The traditional approaches mentioned by Marino and Hunt too often make for readers who are quite competent at second guessing anthologies of critical essays on the works in question, but unable to construct a reading.

'Critical reading' remains as elusive a concept for those involved in teaching and assessment of reading as 'effective writing' has been for teachers of composition and literature. Too often reading has been taught and assessed as a set of passive skills rather than as an active construction of meaning. Moreover, this is where Marino's search for 'significant covariance' between improvement in reading and writing leads us astray, leaving us at the mercy of woefully inadequate measures of reading comprehension. Researchers involved in reading assessment have noted that reading tests often reflect an inadequate articulation of concepts of comprehension. Tuinman (in Harste, ed. 1978), for example, argues that tests of reading comprehension too often mistake 'lower order' reading skills for the kinds and levels of competence entailed in comprehension.

What I am suggesting is that Marino's call for hard data—Belanger's research aside—is based on the supposition that adequate empirical devices exist for testing (1) reading comprehension as psycholinguistics and cognitive psychologists have defined it, and (2) the writing process. The 'tacit acceptance' of the validity of existing measures of literacy, I might caution him, is itself an 'unexamined canon' in many academic circles other than English Departments, and an insidious one at that.

Granted, for many the teaching of writing remains a musty tour through the Norton Anthology, with the enjoinder to 'go at it.' Evaluation too often entails a comparison of the work of students/copyists with a transcendent form, usually not the literature itself but the professor's own articles. As it stands, though, Hunt's proposal—that 'helping students learn to write entails helping them to read'—deserves better. Certainly the revision and rewriting process, if not composition itself, requires many of the same competencies and knowledges as critical reading.

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Review: *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*, by Teun Adrianus van Dijk and Walter Kintsch. New York: Academic Press, 1983. 385 pp.

Specialization being what it is, a book by Teun van Dijk and Walter Kintsch is sure to be a major event for linguists and psychologists interested in discourse, and yet among teachers of literature and writing it could go completely unnoticed. In this review therefore I will give an overview of the book, and, ultimately, suggest why *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension* may be an important statement for everyone interested in language. First, though, I will attempt a very informal description of van Dijk and Kintsch's approach.

Suppose Bob is an ideal reader, in a waiting room, leafing through *Newsweek* magazine. According to van Dijk and Kintsch, discourse comprehension has already begun, because Bob already has expectations about what he is likely to find. First, he would expect certain *types* of discourse to occur--specifically, 'news reports,' which tend to have characteristic structures. Second, Bob would expect certain discourse *content*: articles in *Newsweek* are often about politics, and even when not specifically about politics in the U.S., they usually discuss foreign matters from an American perspective.

Now suppose Bob comes across an article titled 'Guatemala: No Choices.' Based upon his knowledge of news reports, he knows that titles express main ideas (technically, 'macropropositions'), or at least fragments of them. Provisionally, then, he accepts the title as a macroproposition; namely, 'there are no (political) choices in Guatemala.' At the same time, he activates (part of) what he knows about Guatemala and about politics. There are two sides to this. First, this knowledge will be used, when needed, to help understand the language of the text; second, the information in the text will modify or 'update' his knowledge--what van Dijk and Kintsch call his 'situation model'--of Guatemala, U.S. foreign policy, and whatever else is referred to by the text.

Bob then reads the first clause of the article: 'Compared with the relative shades of gray in El Salvador, . . .' In van Dijk and Kintsch's analysis, two major things are going on here. First, based upon his knowledge of the language Bob knows that 'compared with' requires at least two objects to be compared, and so at this point he will be expecting another one, to go with 'El Salvador.' Second, objects that are 'compared' must be compared on some property, for example, color. Is El Salvador gray? No, countries don't have colors (he assumes the world referred to by the text is normal unless there are good reasons not to). 'Shades of gray' therefore must be given a metaphorical interpretation, and the interpretation is made under the guidance of macropropositions currently in mind; in this case, 'there are no political choices in Guatemala.' Consequently 'shades of gray' probably refers to the political situation in El Salvador. Meanwhile, Bob is still waiting for the other half of the comparison. The political situation is said to be 'gray' in El Salvador; compared with that, in (somewhere), it is (something). Again, given the provisional macroproposition, a good guess would be that 'somewhere' is Guatemala. So, if the situation in El Salvador is gray, in Guatemala it is . . . (some color term that isn't gray).

Needless to say, this isn't far wrong: the full sentence reads, 'Compared with the relative shades of gray in El Salvador, Guatemala is a study in black and white.' From this our ideal reader may construct a second macroproposition, something like 'The political situation in Guatemala is more extreme than in El Salvador.' And so on.

This example, oversimplified though it is, illustrates some important features of the approach taken by van Dijk and Kintsch in this book. First, it shows that comprehension occurs 'on-line'; we don't wait until sentences or texts are finished before we start trying to

understand them. Instead, we try to understand discourse as soon as possible; or, to put it the other way around, comprehension is a gradual, cumulative process. The second feature that this example illustrates is that comprehension involves various types of information. In particular, we have available textual, contextual, and cognitive sources of information, which we combine flexibly, in no fixed order. The overall, controlling goal of this process is to understand the discourse as effectively as possible.

In short, discourse comprehension is *strategic*. Judging from their title, this is the central notion—the main macroproposition, as it were—that van Dijk and Kintsch wish to convey. According to them, when we understand discourse, we use 'strategies.' Strategies are not necessarily conscious. They are unlike *rules*: rules tend to be slow, but they guarantee success, whereas strategies are faster and more flexible, and can lead to errors. Strategic understanding must also be distinguished from *analytic* understanding: whereas strategies work with partial, incomplete information, as it comes in, analysis operates on the entire input.

In this interdisciplinary work (van Dijk is a linguist, Kintsch a cognitive psychologist) the authors argue strongly that comprehension is not a unitary process. Instead, there are many different kinds of comprehension, and the plan of the book reflects its multileveled nature. Thus, individual chapters are devoted to: propositional strategies; strategies for establishing local coherence; strategies of a more global nature; strategies for the use of knowledge; as well as one chapter on production strategies. In each of these chapters, the plan is the same. First, there is a detailed discussion of the strategies in question; next, these are illustrated by means of the *Newsweek* article on Guatemala; and finally, some recent experiments from the authors' laboratories are described. Although at times this chapter-by-chapter approach makes comprehension seem fragmentary or 'modular'—as if the different kinds of strategies operate independently of one another—in reading the book one gradually develops a sense of how the comprehender might use various kinds of strategies all at once, interactively.

Besides strategies, the other central concept of *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension* is, of course, 'comprehension.' I have already alluded to the fact that van Dijk and Kintsch take comprehension to be many different things. Furthermore, it should be stressed that they are interested in comprehension *in general*. Thus they deliberately ignore differences in comprehension associated with different discourse types as well as different individuals. Similarly, their account is idealistic in the sense that they assume a comprehender whose goal is complete understanding. Because it is a general theory, though, it can in principle be applied to novice as well as to expert readers; to expository prose, to literature, to conversations; and so on. This work remains to be done, however.

Actually, it is not quite accurate to call van Dijk and Kintsch's work a 'theory.' Because it is, on the one hand, very complex, and on the other, very general, it is more like a meta-theory from which situation- and discourse-specific theories and models may be derived. Or, as the authors put it:

> What we have presented is not so much as theory as a framework for a theory. We have tried to define the principles needed to construct a theory, given a particular comprehension situation. There can be no theory of comprehension that is at once specified and general because there is no single, unitary process 'comprehension.' Every time we look at discourse comprehension, it is a little bit different. What one needs to deal with this situation is a framework for studying it, a set of principles and analyses that can be applied to concrete cases. (p. 383)

So, what use is all this? What value can it have for teachers of literature or writing? It must be emphasized again that van Dijk and Kintsch's framework is a general one, so there is very little specific mention of literature, and not a great deal on writing. No pedagogical implications are drawn. Even so, the framework's usefulness resides in its ability to provide a way of thinking about---a model---of comprehension. If you take van Dijk and Kintsch seriously, you can't help seeing comprehension as a very complex, but ultimately intelligent activity. Applying this way of thinking to specific texts seems to 'slow things down', to open up comprehension processes for inspection and---by implication---for intervention (cf. the 'Guatemala' example in the first few paragraphs of this review).

Aside from its potential usefulness, what is the 'validity' of this approach? That's a tough question. As van Dijk and Kintsch admit, the new experimental findings presented in the book are only a beginning. The ultimate test may in fact be how well the framework is able to inspire empirically-testable models of comprehension for specific situations. In other words, we must adopt a wait-and-see strategy.

Meanwhile, it is already clear that van Dijk and Kintsch have provided a framework, a set of 'principles and analyses' that enable a new way of thinking about comprehension in all its complexity. But then, of course, they've done that before (Kintsch & van Dijk, 'Toward a Model of Text Comprehension and Production,' *Psychological Review*, 1978). Compared to that paper, *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension* is far broader in scope, and of course more detailed, too; I suspect that its impact will be correspondingly greater.

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Canadian Caucus Session Scheduled for Minneapolis 4 Cs

The Conference on College Composition and Communication has generously allowed us still another 'Canadian Caucus' session during their March 21-23 conference in Minneapolis. The Canadian Caucus session is scheduled for Friday, March 22nd, 5:30-6:30pm.

Unlike those at the NCTE Annual Convention, which are sponsored and organized by the CCTE, these 4 Cs Canadian Caucus sessions have no official status. We've met three times that I know of (I believe Aviva Freedman proposed and organized the first of these gatherings). Although plots of various sorts have been hatched, most have expired well before they've fledged; and the primary value of these sessions has been that they've given us opportunities to meet and come to know one another. Many of us believe, however, that these sessions can be even more valuable than they've previously been; and, as well, correspondence I have received from 4 Cs organizers suggests that they might like us to be rather more formally structured than we are.

This, then, is a plea for suggestions regarding an agenda for our Canadian Caucus session. Please send me your ideas about what a Canadian Caucus might actually try to accomplish. Can such a session serve useful purposes? If so, what purposes? Also, please let me know if you will be attending the 4 Cs in Minneapolis, and if you might be attending the Canadian Caucus session. I will put together some kind of agenda. I will also reproduce, assemble, and mail---to anyone I hear from---any materials you send me.

Jim Reither

Default Modes and Debugging: Two Conferences

Because they've often been designed for business offices, many word processing programs come with features which need to be reset to more useful configurations every time an academic user starts the program. This can be annoying, and ultimately may make the program unusable—unless you can change the program's 'default modes,' the configurations which operate in the absence of conscious choices.

In the field of English, the default mode for a conference session has, for at least the last fifteen or twenty years, been something like this: a session, held in a university classroom or some hotel's closest attainable imitation of one, is identified in the program mainly by its subject matter—an author or a historical period, for example; a speaker, identified primarily by a curtailed version of his academic CV, reads a paper ranging in length from a half hour to sixty minutes or more and then entertains—after a long, uncomfortable pause—three or four questions designed to allow the questioner to establish his or her own expertise in the field. Upon adjourning to a hallway or lobby (one to which the audiences from a number of similar sessions have similarly adjourned) what forms the basis of the conversation is not the paper just heard but more general professional concerns and gossip.

In various corners of the profession, people have clawed their way into the programming language and managed to change this default mode, but it remains the norm. This is partly because some experimental changes haven't worked out very well, and partly because it often happens that the default mode is so deeply ingrained in conference presenters that nothing organizers can say deters them from reading their forty or fifty minute papers and looking up expectantly for questions—even though, in some cases, the paper was announced as part of a panel of three short papers, and the allotted time for the session has long expired.

Two conferences in the east in October tried in at least a couple of ways to create alternatives to the traditional pattern; it may be interesting to consider the areas in which they succeeded, and those in which they failed, to alter the default mode.

On August 12–14 the University of New Hampshire hosted a conference titled 'Relating Reading and Writing in the College Years,' organized by Thomas Newkirk. One of the ways it tried to avoid the standard pattern was to schedule a large number of plenary sessions. Beteween Friday evening and Sunday noon there were eight such sessions, at which we heard papers by Richard Ohmann, David Bartholomae, Paul Mariani, Gary Lindberg, Judith Fishman, Ann Berthoff, Lynn Troyka, and Don Murray. There was no scheduled time for discussion after any of these papers; instead, during the concurrent sessions at other time slots, pairs of plenary speakers held discussion sessions. For example, Ohmann and Bartholomae, who gave immediately adjacent talks on Friday night, were available for questions during Saturday morning's 9:30 slot. This struck me as an interesting innovation, but not interesting enough to tempt to me attend any of those discussion sessions; this particular one, for example, was opposite six other sessions, including an excellent one by Chris Anson of Minnesota on the complexity of intention in student writing, and equally promising ones by Marilyn Sternglass and Susan Smith of Indiana, Don Daiker and Mary Hayes of Miami, and others.

Still, one effect of scheduling so many plenary sessions was that all of us had certain speakers and ideas in common, and we did tend to discuss issues relatively more and our mutual acquaintances from graduate school and other conferences a little less over coffee and dinner. On the other hand, eight unidirectional, non-participatory lectures did seem a lot of passive listening for a 36-hour conference. There were times—as in Gary Lindberg's brilliant and elegant presentation of some connections between what we know about writing processes

and what he's learning about reading processes—when it hardly mattered; but there were a lot of times when we all could have done with a little more interaction and a little less reception.

The second conference, the annual meeting on October 16 and 17 of the Atlantic University Teachers of English at Mount St. Vincent in Halifax, did not attempt to make so clear a break with tradition. This may be partly because a conference like the AUTE must attract and serve English teachers with a wide range of interests and expectations. Unlike the New Hampshire conference, it can't announce a theme and allow that to determine its constituency; it must serve the constituency already out there—in this case, in the English departments across the Atlantic provinces.

The attempts that the conference organizers, Susan Drain and Olga Broomfield, did make to loosen the straight jacket of the default-mode session were (1) scheduling sessions which included two short papers, (2) organizing a free-form discussion session on writing programs in the Atlantic provinces, to which participants were to bring descriptions of the program at their home university, and (3) adopting a specific theme. That theme, 'Beyond the Canon,' seemed admirably appropriate for appealing to a broad constituency, and it allowed a reasonably wide range of ideas to get a hearing. There were papers, for instance, on the female breast in Victorian literature, on deconstruction, on science fiction (cancelled because the speaker was fogbound), and a paper I found particularly interesting by Wendy Katz and Kenna Manos on the marginal status of children's literature, subtitled 'Women and Children Last Again.' On the other hand, I didn't hear many coffee-break or dinner-table conversations about the canon or its position in English department research and curricula.

Part of the reason may have been the relative dearth of plenary sessions; there was a guest speaker, the charming but not very challenging Erika Ritter, on Friday night, and the next morning a more useful keynote on the impact on departments and curricula of the paradigm shift in literary studies, by Stephen Bonnycastle. The rest of the program was concurrent sessions, primarily composed of sets of two papers. A serious problem there, however, was the tendency of a number of presenters to act, in those sessions, as though the default mode were in operation, and to deliver forty or fifty minute readings. When grouping two or three shorter papers works, as veterans of social science and composition conferences have known for decades, it can work very well, but it does depend (at least) on everyone involved accepting the 'new' mode.

Another attempt to break out of the default mode, a discussion on writing programs, suffered from defaultitis in that no one—myself included (*mea culpa*)— actually brought the prerequisite description of the writing program at his or her own institution. Still, Susan Drain, as chair, managed to supervise an often animated discussion which, if it was a little short on specifics and a little long on what Mina Shaughnessy used to call 'reports from the bedroom,' seemed to be useful to most of the people involved.

On the whole, in any case, the conference was more thoughtfully planned and energetically organized than any AUTE meeting I've been to in fifteen years or so. It didn't mount the kind of assault on the default mode we might have hoped for (neither did the New Hampshire conference, though it went a little further); but both were the kind of conference which can give us a bit of hope. With the right debugging tools, we might find a way to make these programs run yet, and start to organize conferences that will serve our current, real needs and purposes, instead of those of those who wrote the original programs, back in the fifties and sixties, and before.

Russell A. Hunt
Entertainment Editor