

# Inkshed Online Newsletter, April 2012

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## Introduction

It's spring, your marking is nearly done, and it's time to read and reflect again. This second issue of the new Inkshed Newsletter will give you lots to think about and enjoy, with topics ranging from the worth of poetry-writing to the nature and value of writing studies in Canada. These pieces will make you laugh, make you cry, make you wonder, and make you want to come to the 2012 Inkshed Conference to hear and say more.

Andrea Williams has written the first published review of the new collection on the place of writing in the knowledge society; Doug Brent follows with thoughts (he says curmudgeonly, I say stimulating) about the state of writing instruction in Canada; Leora Freedman tells a thought-provoking story about using a strange piece of contemporary art to elicit real discussion in the classroom; Carl Leggo gives us a poem about poetry and a reflection on what it's worth; and Nancy Johnston tells us about a poet who represents a new way of teaching writing and creativity.

Now it's your turn to talk back. Each piece is followed by a box inviting a reply, which will be displayed following the article and listed in the sidebar. You're also welcome to post a new short piece of your own, or to send me an article towards the next issue of the Newsletter.

Thanks to the five authors who created this collection of spring reading, the group of reviewers who read and gave advice, and the site designer Tania Smith, who has made our pages navigable.

## Articles

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# Making Writers and Writing Visible: A Review of Writing in Knowledge Societies

by Andrea L. Williams, University of Toronto, [al.williams@utoronto.ca](mailto:al.williams@utoronto.ca)

***Writing in Knowledge Societies.*** Edited by Doreen Starke-Meyerring, Anthony Paré, Natasha Artemeva, Miriam Horne, and Larissa Yousoubova. Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse (web). Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2011 (print)

Exploring the deep and complex link between writing and knowledge from a wide range of perspectives, this collection asks pressing questions like “What role (or roles) does writing play in knowledge societies, and how is writing itself a form of knowledge?” The book was developed from two CASDW conferences in 2006 and 2007 and is available for free online at the WAC Clearinghouse ([wac.colostate.edu/books/winks/](http://wac.colostate.edu/books/winks/)), which will hopefully bring it the wider audience it deserves.

Many of us must convince colleagues and administrators that the teaching and study of writing is serious intellectual work, and this collection provides strong evidence for this argument. The six sections of the book are organized as follows: (I) an introductory chapter; (II) conceptual, methodological and historical perspectives on writing; (III) writing in public and professional settings; (IV) writing in research environments; and (V and VI) writing in higher education. In chapter one, Starke-Meyerring and Paré situate the contributions to the book in the rich tradition of rhetoric as epistemic, which has roots in classical rhetoric. Of the anthology’s 27 authors and editors, seventeen are affiliated with Canadian institutions, nine with US institutions and one with City University, Hong Kong.

That many of the authors use Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) as their framework suggests the strong influence of this theoretical approach among Canadian writing scholars. Schryer’s chapter provides a thorough history of RGS and shows why it offers such a useful framework for studying writing since it attends to both texts and their social contexts, which she convincingly argues can yield thoughtful pedagogies that avoid rigid rules. The RGS orientation of many of the chapters certainly doesn’t diminish the diversity of the book, since the framework is applied in so many different ways and contexts. Examining writing by a broad range of actors and within a variety of settings, including physicists (Heather Graves), Supreme Court judges (Courant Rife), and South Korean ELL students studying at a Canadian university (Lee and Maguire), the collection brings together a range of methodologies (histories, case studies, textual and event analyses) that comprise a rich and diverse field.

In the third section on writing in public and workplace contexts, Spoel and Barriault's case study of public communication in the Sudbury Soils Study draws on rhetoric, science communication and risk communication to challenge current and (models of public engagement that are unidirectional and hierarchical rather than dialogic (109). Wegner's analysis of a local environmental activist group also uses a variety of theoretical lenses to show the challenges faced by groups seeking to be heard by bureaucrats and politicians and thereby contribute to community knowledge-making, without losing their activist identity.

A notable theme that emerges in this third section of the book is the often invisible nature of writing and its role in knowledge creation: despite the powerful influence writing wields in so many fields, it is seldom recognized as knowledge work or work of any kind. Courant Rife's chapter on judicial writing illustrates "not only how law shapes writing, but also how writing shapes law" (141). She examines a judicial opinion for a landmark Supreme Court of Canada case involving a publisher suing the Law Society of Upper Canada over giving patrons access to copy machines for legal materials. Courant Rife shows how the very judicial decision that upheld consumers' rights to use copyrighted materials borrows (like all writing) from the writing of others. Her analysis shows legal writing, which relies heavily on precedents, some of which span national borders, to be a highly collaborative form of writing that uses "innovative forms of global remixing" (140). Yet despite the significant impact of this and many other judicial decisions, it's doubtful that most legal professionals consider writing as central to their work and one can't help but wonder about the effects of this lack of consideration about writing on both legal education and practice.

In a similar manner, in chapter eight, Hart-Davidson and Grabill present three different case studies of workplace writers, none of whom see writing as central to their work: "few if any of these professionals understand their activity as writing even though they write all the time" (721). The fact that many professionals who write regularly don't recognize or acknowledge the importance of their writing (in contrast to *professional writers* who define their work and their professional selves in terms of writing) contributes to the invisibility of writing in many workplaces. Hart-Davidson and Grabill argue that research about writing therefore plays a key role in "making writing visible, particularly to those doing the writing" (175).

Section four of the book examines writing in different research contexts and is of particular interest to those of us who work in WAC or WID roles. Hyland's chapter, which presents a textual analysis of 30 research articles from a broad range of fields, highlights how rhetorical practices are inextricably linked to the different purposes of different disciplines. For example, he explores how personal credibility is more important to writers in the humanities and social sciences, so these writers consequently use more "hedgies and boosters" (204), whereas writers in the sciences are more concerned with making generalizations, so they rely more on methods, procedures, and equipment (205). Although these findings may hardly be surprising to scholars of rhetoric who have long maintained that successful writers must adapt different strategies for different audiences and occasions (or "genres" to use the term from RGS), by showing the significantly different strategies

employed by writers in different disciplines, Hyland's analysis contributes to our understanding of how writers are both enabled and constrained by disciplinary discourses and in this way provides evidence to buttress WID programs.

Paré, Starke-Meyerring, and McAlpine's chapter on knowledge and identity work in the doctoral student-supervisor relationship explores the academic community's knowledge-making activities, which they argue form an all too often "invisible curriculum" of practices that "are usually learned, but not taught, enacted, but not articulated" (217). Their chapter calls for greater rhetorical awareness on the part of students and faculty alike as a means of increasing student agency. Both these chapters, like the entire collection, contribute to the ongoing project of making writing and its role in knowledge creation visible. The final chapter of section four is a case study of Inkshed. Having attended Inkshed only twice over the course of many years, I wondered if Horne's account would be of interest to someone not familiar with the community. However, Horne's case study makes a broader (and important) point about writers' experiences of vulnerability when addressing unfamiliar audiences, which is often the very situation student writers face. Consequently, whether or not you've ever attended or even heard of Inkshed, Horne's chapter makes for compelling reading.

The final two sections of the book that address writing in higher education also speak to the theme of making writing visible knowledge work. Rogers and Walling argue that good writing instruction must help students understand the potential power and impact of writing: "Without knowledge of the ways that writing can be used to shape the world and our understanding of it . . . students will see writing as an obstacle that stands between them and their goals rather than a powerful instrument for participating in the world" (270). Picking up on the theme of invisibility, Roger Graves points out the lack of accounts from the perspective of writing program administrators at Canadian universities and describes the rhetorical challenges he has faced in his role as WPA and how he has used writing to make a case for the value of writing instruction. Procter's chapter traces the role writing centres have played at the University of Toronto in establishing writing and writing instruction as intellectual activities, and the long and bumpy road writing instructors have travelled to earn recognition for their work and achieve professional status and job security. Graves's and Procter's chapters will hopefully pave the way for additional accounts and institutional histories that enrich our understanding of writing programs and writing centres, particularly in the Canadian context.

In exploring a broad range of writers, texts and contexts through a variety of theoretical lenses, this collection will appeal to diverse rhetoric and writing scholars. The book, or selections from it, would work well in graduate-level seminars as well as senior undergraduate courses. The section on writing in workplace settings would also be of interest to professional communication researchers and teachers. In short, this collection speaks to the rigour and vitality of rhetoric and writing studies, particularly in the North American context, and helps make visible the central but often invisible role of writing in knowledge creation.

## Rolling the Rock: A Slightly Curmudgeonly Look at Writing Studies in Calgary and the World

by Doug Brent, University of Calgary, dabrent@ucalgary.ca

In 2009, I was invited to be part of a panel on the current state of writing studies in Canada. As I surveyed this state from my vantage point in Calgary, I found it difficult not to adopt a somewhat curmudgeonly demeanour, a demeanour that I confess has not improved much in the three intervening years. In this article, I will try to distil the reasons for that demeanour, and to offer some observations on possible remedies.

Surveying the country more broadly, but selectively – I have no wish to misrepresent this somewhat personal set of observations as any kind of robust sample – I am struck by the unusually sharp rises and declines of noble experiments in Writing in the Disciplines and related endeavours. Writing centres persist and often thrive, I suspect partly because they don't cost very much relative to the size of the problem they address, and also because they are widely perceived as remedial. This perception, despite our repeated attempts to dispel it, seems to function paradoxically as a sort of protective colouration. The "problem" of poor student writing is widely recognized by frustrated faculty members in all disciplines, and as long as writing centres seem to offer a relatively inexpensive means of remedying those problems, even on an ad hoc basis, they are tolerated and even allowed to thrive. However, bolder programs that attempt to address writing on a more system-wide basis seem to have much shorter life spans.

In 1991, for instance, Laurence Steven wrote an eloquent article for *Textual Studies in Canada* about the Writing Across the Curriculum program at Laurentian. That article, evocatively titled "The grain of sand in the oyster," detailed the ways in which a writing competence test at Laurentian had functioned as a sufficient irritant to push the institution as a whole to create a reasonably high-functioning WAC program, complete with faculty seminars on incorporating writing into courses and an array of designated Writing Intensive courses across the disciplines. The program was far from perfect, but I took sufficient heart from it that I was very cautious in my attempts to snuff out the University of Calgary's old-school writing test in the hope that it too might spawn some form of pearl. I'll return to the U of C shortly; here I just want to observe that the WI initiative at Laurentian has now vanished, blown away by shifts in the political wind. An enviable number of rhetoric-focussed courses still exist within the English Department, only a few of which are first-year fix-it courses, but penetration beyond the walls of that one department appears to have evaporated.

Closer to the present, most of us are familiar with the breathtakingly bold and far-reaching (and well-funded) Writing Intensive program at Simon Fraser that Wendy Strachan describes in her

recent book, *Writing-intensive: Becoming W-faculty in a new writing curriculum* (reviewed and summarized by Margaret Procter and Theresa Hyland in a recent issue of *Inkshed*). Unfortunately, the last chapter of Wendy's book describes the progressive dismantling of much of the infrastructure that supported this program, including the Centre for Writing-Intensive Learning that was to have been its administrative hub. The program still exists, and a glance at the SFU academic calendar provides evidence of an impressive list of writing-intensive courses. However, here too we can see some early cracks in the structure that can be traced to a failure of nerve at the upper administrative level.

Despite the continued existence of robust programs here and there across the land – I invite people involved in such programs to discuss their achievements in future issues of this newsletter – the record of writing studies in Canada is spotty to say the least. In the rest of this article, I will discuss a case study that I know from the inside, the repeated failures of Writing Across the Curriculum to gain traction at the University of Calgary. I will allow myself the luxury of a bit of lamentation, but I hope I won't take this to excess. Sometimes you can learn even more from failures than from successes. I hope to use this particular history of failures as a lens through which to view the entire problem of professionalizing a discipline that often stubbornly resists professionalization, or even characterization as a discipline, in a country that seems to be, on the whole, writing-averse.

Here, then, is a selective review of the history of writing at the University of Calgary.

**1992.** Since 1976, the university has been dealing with the “problem” of writing primarily by means of a writing competence requirement and test. One of the ways of meeting the requirement is to take a first year English course. By 1992, the English department, which has offered an infinitely expanding number of sections of first-year comp for many years, finally decides it's had enough and cancels the course. They cite a lack of expertise and a belief that writing is best taught across the disciplines. They will teach people to write English papers, History can teach people to write History papers, and Physics can teach people to write Physics lab reports.

A teachable moment, as we say in the trade, The U of C is ripe for a Writing Across the Curriculum conversion.

The University of Calgary commissions a study on whether it is possible to find enough sections of writing-intensive courses that already exist to realize a primitive form of a writing-intensive requirement without putting extra money into it. (“No new expenditures” has long ago replaced “Mo Shùile Togam Suas” as the official motto of the University of Calgary.) Surprise – the answer is “no.” While the committee does identify a goodly number of courses that fit their rough-and-ready guidelines for writing intensive courses, they are generally taught in small sections and there are far too few seats available to meet anticipated demand. The teachable moment goes away.

Moral – professionalizing any discipline takes money. Our discipline is more resistant than most because teaching and responding to writing is labour intensive. As we all know, doing it right means

doing it across the entire curriculum. Our very interdisciplinarity is our undoing because it makes what we do expensive.

**1999.** The University of Calgary undertakes an ambitious curriculum review process across the entire campus. Sets of core competencies and required general features of course design are proposed and vigorously debated. They will form the underpinnings of a revitalization that will affect every discipline on campus.

I write a detailed, deeply researched, and, may I say, eloquent proposal for writing to have a central place in these plans. Nothing much comes of it. Upon inquiry, the committee eventually states that it lost the proposal. I have wisely saved a copy on my hard drive, and send it again. It appears as an appendix to the master document but in no way informs that document. Nothing comes of it.

Moral – professionalizing a discipline, even at a major teachable moment, takes visibility. The literature that the Curriculum Review Committee was reading was the Education literature on curriculum features which does not include any particular emphasis on writing as a feature. The fact that we have our own rich literature – a sure sign of incipient professionalization – is our undoing because it is not highly visible to others.

A richly ironic anecdote underscores this invisibility. A while ago I was reading Anne Herrington's edited collection of essays on WAC, borrowed from the U of C library. Part way through I found an Air Canada boarding pass that someone had used as a bookmark. The name on it was mine, and the date was fifteen years earlier. When I checked the date stamps in the back, I found that no-one else had signed that book out in those fifteen years other than me and me. I guess WAC really isn't much of a topic of conversation at the University of Calgary.

**2003-2009.** Over several years, aided by transfusions of money from a variety of sources, the Faculty of Communication and Culture hires four new people with expertise in and commitment to rhetoric and writing. One of them even gets to teach a grad course on the subject, once. I write a cautiously optimistic chapter for Graves and Graves' book, called "Same roots, different soil," on the advantages of locating writing in a Communications Studies program rather than in a more traditional home such as an English department.

Over the next few years, a budget cut takes two of these people, who of course are not replaced at all. A third resigns for unconnected personal reasons. The Dean, no friend of rhetoric, replaces her with a person who teaches for a totally different program. A fourth retires and, despite passionate pleas by the Division Head (not me this time), the Dean replaces her, not with a rhetorician, but with a person in Media Studies. The Division Head eventually resigns his administrative position. I have been rethinking the optimistic tone of my chapter in Graves and Graves.

Moral – Rhetoric is, perhaps more than any other field, immensely dependent on the good will of people in positions of power. When the tide turns because the people in those positions of power

do not personally believe in it, the enterprise founders. Our unhealthy dependence on champions is our undoing.

**2010.** The Writing Centre, which for decades has been housed in the Faculty of Communication and Culture and run by a succession of people with full academic appointments, is hijacked by force and incorporated into the new Student Success Centre. The current Director, Jo-Anne Andre, wants no part of this de-professionalization and remains behind with the Faculty. To do her at least a little credit, the Associate Provost in charge of the hijacking advertises for a new Director with a background in writing and rhetoric. However, since the position is administrative rather than academic, and comes with no ties to any academic unit, no-one in our field will touch it. The Writing Centre continues to be run by people with some training and interest in educational administration but no training or interest in writing.

Shortly thereafter, the Associate Provost digs out a report that Jo-Anne and I wrote recommending that the Effective Writing Test, now over thirty years old, be abandoned in favour of some form of Writing Across the Curriculum program. The report has been gathering dust since 2004, but now it serves a political purpose. Part 1, abandoning the test, is implemented, for some of the right reasons (it can't be shown to be doing its job) and some of the wrong reasons (it's a huge administrative nuisance).

Since this grain of sand has persisted as sand and has shown no signs of growing a pearl in all those years, I give the plan two cheers. (See my article "Dangerous partnerships" in the *Writing Across the Curriculum Journal* for what I now think of the "grain of sand in the oyster" strategy.) I don't even protest when Part 2, the idea of a WAC program, goes nowhere. In fact, I actively campaign against mounting such a program unless the university is prepared to make a substantial administrative and financial commitment, which of course it isn't. Never in a million years would I have thought that I would be arguing against a WAC program, but by this time I have seen so many false starts that I can't bear to witness another one. (I also voted strategically in the recent provincial election, for the first time in my life voting for the Progressive Conservatives solely to keep the farther-right Wildrose party from gaining ground. It's funny what age does to a person.)

What are we to make of this Jeremiad? Does it simply show that the University of Calgary offers particularly infertile soil, or can we learn something about how writing may be able to make some professional gains even in unpromising environments. I think that there are some guardedly positive lessons to be learned if we want to avoid endless repetitions of similar sad stories.

First, we need to get less expensive. As long as we are seen as solvers of a system-wide "problem," we simply cost too much to survive the next change in administrative direction or economic fortunes. We need to be no more expensive to run than a department in comparable disciplines such as History or Geography. These departments teach History students or Geography students. They are not expected to fix the inferior historical or geographical abilities of an entire institution.

Similarly, we need to see research and teaching in our discipline as our core business, not just as an add-on to a business of fixing everybody everywhere.

This sounds like another classic lament about being marginalized and seen as the night cleaners of the academy. However, that's not my point right now. My point is that this position, whether it devalues us or not, simply costs too much. Maybe we should emulate theoretical astrophysics instead. No-one ever asks a theoretical astrophysicist to justify dozens or hundreds of sections of service courses which, however cheaply taught, never seem to earn their way. They only ask to justify a few sections of courses aimed at people interested in theoretical astrophysics. This seems much easier than justifying a writing program.

In short, professionalizing writing depends on just plain not worrying about our place in mass curricular movements. That has served rhetoric well at certain times and places. It seems to be working at SFU, at least for the moment and despite some sizable speed bumps. It continues to work at many institutions in the US where our profession was largely born out of a need to solve a crisis brought on by open admissions. But depending on that level of desperation is like an epidemiologist hoping for a mass pandemic so that she can get recognition for curing it. When asked to do the laundry for the entire institution, we need to resist the flattery and the short-term money, and do what the U of C English department did – tell the administration to take a running jump.

This inversion of thinking might also reduce our dependence on champions. To be really professional, we need to become accepted for our own sake, as a research institution that does not always need someone to look after it from above.

Unfortunately, while I can't see another good way out of the interconnected traps I have outlined above, I have a lot of trouble believing my own advice. I got into this line of work because I hoped to make a difference in individual students' lives by teaching them an important life skill. The service industry mentality is a trap, but it's also what gets me out of bed in the morning. My students and I are hopeless co-dependents. Helping a damaged writer become a passable or even exceptional writer is just not something I'm prepared to give up.

Likewise, the university and the writing program are co-dependents. The university needs us. Why else would they keep reinventing writing programs after having strangled the previous one? And we need them and their needy students in order to fulfill the purpose that got us into this job in the first place.

I haven't entirely come through on my promise to extract some positive lessons from a litany of negative experiences. But I hope I've been able to come across as doing more than simply lamenting the fact that the rock keeps rolling to the bottom of the hill just when we think we might have pushed it some of the way to the top. Part of the reason I am still in the game is that some time ago I decided that each academic unit needs to do whatever it feels prepared to do for the

cause, given the unique circumstances of each time and place, and not worry about what the institution as whole is or is not doing. We can do what we do without changing the attitudes of an entire institution, and occasionally we can take advantage of striking turns of events to build programs such as the one at SFU without fretting about what will happen to it when the administration loses interest or money gets tight.

Perhaps the best we can do with our absurd position is to take Camus' advice and imagine Sisyphus as being happy at his work.

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## Mud Ball: Reflections on Teaching Critical Thinking

by Leora Freedman, University of Toronto, [leora.freedman@utoronto.ca](mailto:leora.freedman@utoronto.ca)

I've been reflecting lately on the teaching of critical thinking and its significance to language learning. In the drop-in English classes I teach for multilingual undergraduates on the St. George campus of University of Toronto, critical thinking is woven into all of our activities. Faculty of Arts and Science students have been coming to our "Communication Café"\* in increasingly large numbers to practice and develop their English in relation to topics ranging from science fraud to conceptual art. In watching this process unfold, I've come to the conclusion that the effective

teaching of critical thinking to language learners requires what artists call “negative space.” This is the space that is *not* the object in the picture; it is the background or space delineated by the object. Negative space influences our seeing, and it may be manipulated intentionally by the artist.

In discussing plagiarism prevention, DeSena (2007) uses this same artistic concept to denote the expanse of existing knowledge (secondary sources) against which students must learn to forge a design, or viewpoint, of their own. I would add that as instructors, we can also imagine ourselves as part of the negative space. We can work to ensure that students push outward to express their own individual concepts, which we in turn should hold, enhance, and make room for rather than overwhelm. In doing so, we foster language acquisition.

One recent “Café” was based around *Creamier II*, a book containing reproductions of the work of young artists from around the world. Much of the work is conceptual, as was the first piece we discussed, Rosa-Chancho’s “Mud Ball.” The work is a three-ton ball of mud, suspended from the ceiling of a white gallery. (See [rosa-chancho.weebly.com/mud-ball.html](http://rosa-chancho.weebly.com/mud-ball.html)). After some introductory remarks about conceptual art, I challenged the students to respond not only to this piece but also to the curator’s remarks and the artists’ explanations. Like Casanave & Sosa (2008), I believe that grappling with difficult concepts in English is essential to our students’ linguistic progress, and that speaking about complex ideas can motivate and deepen students’ academic writing.

Initially, they shrugged and were silent. So I suggested approaching a work of art first on the most basic level: Do you like it, or not? They seemed to be waiting for me to tell them whether they were supposed to like it. The TAs I work with frequently mention this: Students are afraid of being wrong, and not only about something as esoteric as Mud Ball. Finally one student said he did not like it, that it looked just like a big ball of *caca*. When I didn’t object, other students felt they had the idea, and a discussion ensued. They said, essentially, that this piece was an elaborate scam, connoting the futility of art or any kind of action. Then they were ready to move on to the next picture.

However, one student hadn’t said anything, so I asked him, “Do you agree?” He replied “No.” It turned out that he liked Mud Ball. What’s more, he saw it in a completely different way. To him, it was the earth, spinning in space, seen from a distance. He spoke slowly, and as he talked about the piece, his speech became poetic. Mud Ball could be seen as an environmentalist message, he said. It spoke of the possibilities of the earth and the danger of the obliteration of life. By the time he finished, some of the others were persuaded to see the piece as more of a provocation than a scam. Many of them noted down new vocabulary words. Even those who didn’t agree contributed more complex statements than they’d made originally.

I believe it was the negative space in our discussion that benefited them. This space included moments of receptive silence. Particularly with students who may or may not be thinking in English, it’s essential that we approach a discussion with patience and without seeming concerned about their inevitable errors. As Leki (2001) points out, it is in this experience of engaging in a

struggle for meaning that language acquisition is pushed beyond the realm of “skills.” Ultimately, these experiences will show in their writing.

It is also helpful to build negative space into teaching by becoming more conscious of what one can “not-say” or of what students are “not-saying.” For example, consider how this discussion would have differed had I tried to show that Mud Ball exemplifies the superior relevance of conceptual art, thus signaling an expected approach. In the process of trying to create meaning, a student is more likely to reach for the unknown and progress in linguistic competence (Zamel, 2004). If I’d emphasized personal theoretical tendencies, would the students have had enough negative space around their own thoughts to start reaching for the language they needed?

Parallel to this is the necessity of being aware of students’ need for the scaffolding provided by what may feel like an intrusion into their part of the “design.” Knowing when to scaffold a conversation is not always easy. For example, this speaking activity would have turned out differently had I not challenged the quiet student with a direct question. The Communication Café has the relaxed atmosphere of a non-credit activity, and I’ve learned that most quiet students are just waiting to be pushed into taking up a bit more space. This might be riskier in a credit class or tutorial. Yet at the same time, I’m surprised by how frequently students say they don’t feel free to ask questions or express individual interpretations in class discussions. It is very likely that this inhibition affects their writing. Ways must be found to create more imaginative and challenging, more consciously *shaped* negative space around our students. They need it.

## References

\* The English Language Learning (ELL) Communication Café on the St. George campus is based on the well-known model of Dr. Elaine Khoo’s English Language Development (ELD) Communication Café at University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC).

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## A Poem by Carl Leggo

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### Thin Skin

I just wrote a good poem,  
not this poem, another,  
and called out to Lana,  
I just wrote a good poem, I said,  
but a nagging niggling voice,  
(not Lana's, always supportive)  
resounded, your poems aren't any good,  
and while I don't really believe  
my poems aren't any good,  
I've been thinking a lot lately  
I can't just simply ignore  
the dismissive judgements of others  
(even though I want to and suspect I will)  
as I have for a long long time, decades even,  
by insisting my poems are good,  
at least according to me (their value  
to be known one distant day like  
Gertrude Stein knew the new poetry is  
never appreciated for a long long time,  
even a lifetime sometimes, even long  
after the poet's death), and Mother A  
said, you will never be a writer  
and Lou said, your poems aren't very good  
with the kind of fundamentalist authority  
and eagerness for strict categorization,  
even hubris, only a teacher can muster,  
and an external reviewer for my promotion  
said, his poems aren't very good,

and I have been rejected by all  
the pre-eminent literary journals  
in Canada, and most of the less  
eminent ones too, and my last  
royalty cheque still wasn't enough  
for a big pizza at Sorrento's,  
and I can't find my poems  
in any bookstore in Corner Brook,  
and even in Deer Lake airport  
where I was sure my poetry was safe  
from commentary and critique,  
Joe Mercer said, the first book is better  
than the second (I should  
be glad Joe read both)  
and I feel doomed that each  
subsequent publication (if ever  
there are any more, so uncertain)  
will be worse than the last,  
and certainly never as good as the first,  
but in this cacophony of voices,  
I wonder how my poems are being  
judged (perhaps compared to Keats  
and company, or perhaps compared  
to an impressed gold standard of poetry  
as if some king somewhere  
has measured the distance  
from his nose to his toes and knows  
irrefutably a poem's goodness)  
and all I know is I must not  
lose confidence in my poems  
any more than I will lose faith  
in my heart beaten but beating still  
with hope and humour, held close, knowing  
well any poem, even mine, is better than none

## Poet in Community and Poet in Conference: Ronna Bloom

By Nancy Johnston, University of Toronto Scarborough, [nancy.johnston@utoronto.ca](mailto:nancy.johnston@utoronto.ca)

One of my pleasures at Inkshed conferences has been the many opportunities for creative thinking and for writing, whether collaborative inkshedding or my own freewriting. In keeping with this year's theme, *Work-in-Progress, Work-in Conference*, we've invited Ronna Bloom, poet, teacher, psychotherapist, and our "poet in community" at the University of Toronto, to lead a writing workshop tailored to Inkshedders.

Since 2008, Ronna has been the first Poet in Community at the University of Toronto and the founder of unique sessions and writing series that aim to engage students, staff, and instructors in creative reflection and writing. She describes "using writing in the service of the community, for the needs of students, staff and faculty." Some of her sessions promote creativity by writing poetry, and in others she promotes personal reflection through writing prompts. Some of her popular sessions include *A Writer's Process* (a 4-part session salon), *Spontaneous Poetry Booth*, and *Writing Your Way Out of a Paper Bag* (for staff and faculty to reflect on writing blocks).

As her student, in workshops and her Personal Narrative courses in Continuing Studies, I admire her creativity and passion as a teacher and her skill in engaging students in what can be a complex and chaotic writing process.

At Inkshed, Ronna will invite us to write and refresh in her morning session, titled *The Dialect of the Heart: Reconnecting to your Passion for Writing*.

*What if you could bring yourself back to your work enlivened? What if you could bring your students to their writing with revived energy? Sometimes the relationship with what or who we are teaching or researching or writing goes stale. We lose heart. This workshop aims to coax you into different kinds of conversations between work life and creative self, between heart and page. Using poems, prompts, and memories, bring yourselves back into the room with what you know in a new way.*

Ronna Bloom is the author of several books of poetry, including *Public Works* (2004), *Permiso* (2009), and *Cloudy with a Fire in the Basement* (Pedlar Press, forthcoming Fall 2012). More information on Poet in Community at the University of Toronto or her work can be found on Ronna's website <http://www.ronnabloom.com/> and at <http://blogs.studentlife.utoronto.ca/poet/>