Inkshed

Newsletter of the Canadian Association for the
Study of Language and Learning

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This issue was edited by Jane Milton, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design

Editor's notepad

This issue of Inkshed was clearly inspired by the most recent conference, Inkshed 21, held in Sun Peaks.

Thanks are due to Henry Hubert, Rachel Nash, Yaying Zhang, and the many graduate student volunteers who worked so hard to produce another compelling conference. The minutes of the AGM are in this issue. The submissions this time all came out of the conference in one way or another. Geoff Cragg has reproduced his presentation on the merits and pitfalls of using computer technology to deliver large enrolment courses, Doug Brent offers a method for teaching both the why and how of documentation, and Miriam Horne explains what inkshedding means to her. The process of inkshedding came up as a topic of conversation – or perhaps "debate" is a more accurate term - frequently during the conference and we hope to include a presentation or workshop to explore this thing in more depth at the next conference.

The next conference will be held in Nova Scotia, at White Point Beach Lodge, May 12-15 2005. The organizing committee - Pat Saunders, Kenna Manos, Jane Milton and Russ Hunt – have already begun the planning and hope to have a call for proposals ready for early Fall. Please note the weekend is one later than usual.

This is my final edition of Inkshed. Roger and Heather Graves have kindly volunteered to take on a joint editorship, for which I am grateful. They will publish their contact info and make a call for submissions via the listserv. I have enjoyed my stint at the job and thank all of you who provided articles, support, and encouragement along the way. I thank Russ, in particular, for taking care of the technological end of the project and for providing advice whenever I asked.

Wishing you all a happy and safe summer,

Jane Milton

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About Inkshed . . .

This newsletter of the *Canadian Association for the Study of Language and Learning* (CASLL) provides a forum for its subscribers to explore relationships among research, theory, and practice in language acquisition and language use, particularly in the Canadian context. CASLL membership runs from January 1 to December 31 and includes a subscription to Inkshed. To subscribe, send a cheque, made out to "Inkshed at NSCAD," for $20 ($10 for students and the un(der)employed to the following address:
Jane Milton, NSCAD, 5163 Duke Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3J 3J6

-- renew your membership --

Subscribers are invited to submit items of interest related to the theory and practice of reading and writing. CASLL also has a website (www.stu.ca/inkshed) maintained by Russ Hunt.

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Utopian Promises, Institutional Imperatives, and Technology Refusal: A Debate

By Geoff Cragg, University of Calgary

I. Introduction

When we proposed this topic for Inkshed, Bert Deyell and I hoped that it would help to open up a larger discussion about educational technologies, their effects, and the values they serve. From his experience using Blackboard for the first time in a large introductory class, Bert has argued that the program did indeed work, that its bulletin board did encourage critical thinking, and that students were generally very positive towards it. In the next few minutes I would like to take a contrary position and argue that there are good reasons not to use course management software such as Blackboard.

II. Student Perspectives

At the end of my final exam for GNST 341: Information Technology and Society this last term, I included a bonus question. It read: “How can we use IT to strengthen the sense of community in large courses such as GNST 341?” I received a variety of responses, but most fell into four categories. The most common response was to create a class bulletin board because it would serve to extend in-class discussions and it would encourage the shy to have a voice. Opinion was divided about which platform was best: some specified ‘like on Blackboard’, some made no stipulation, and a few were definite that we should not use Blackboard. The next most common suggestion was that we should set up a class website, with notes, readings, and links to other interesting sites. Here again a number of students suggested Blackboard. The third group suggested setting up a bulletin board, but noted significant drawbacks or limitations: they noted that the need to participate would put pressure on students and might cause resentment, and that such a forum would be vulnerable to flaming or takeovers by the mouthy. The fourth and smallest group turned the question on its heels by arguing that 341 wasn’t that big a class (sixty students) and that instead of turning to IT we should concentrate on improving the sense of community by increasing discussion and participation by traditional means.

III. Context

In order to interpret these comments, a brief explanation of the course and its institutional context may be helpful. GNST 341 is a critical and interdisciplinary look at the impacts of IT on North American society; it has been a part of the curriculum for the better part of twenty years, and has no prerequisites. It is therefore an attractive option course for many Science, Engineering, Business and Computer Science students, many of whom seem to focus on “IT” in the title more than “and Society”. Because the course is usually sectioned for between 60-100 students it is obviously harder to teach as a lecture-discussion course than a smaller one. Over the years, I have used bulletin boards (running on a number of platforms starting with Multics) to increase class participation and community. And on the whole, from a subjective perspective, I believe that they have been effective. Why, then, not continue the practice with Blackboard?

I have practical, pedagogical, and philosophical reasons. Among the practical reasons why I fought shy of using Blackboard this term are that I was on sabbatical leave when it was introduced last fall and had no opportunity to try it out; furthermore, it was buggy and crashed in a number of courses for several weeks. Further, the time required to become competent with a complex program was a deterrent. And the title of a course offered by the Learning Commons (the main source of assistance for educational computing at the University of Calgary) called “ How to Teach a Course Using Blackboard and Still Have a Life” didn’t offer much encouragement. The major pedagogical reason was that I felt I didn’t need Blackboard. Instead, I decided to employ assignments I had created the last time I taught the course: group presentations on topics of the students’ choice, followed by more extensive group term papers on the same topics. This seemed to be a way to build involvement, to give students an active sense of teaching content to their peers, and to reinforce the community of the physical class. To have a participation grade for discussion on a bulletin board would have increased an already heavy load of assignments. Furthermore, this class was composed of students who were not shy about emailing me if they needed to consult, and generally they had access to chat programs like Instant Messenger; they didn’t need Blackboard to help them with their group work.

Before I discuss my more philosophical objections, I need to offer more information on the institutional context of educational computing at the University of Calgary and my theoretical perspectives on IT. There are financial and political or rhetorical reasons why IT, particularly as it enables blended learning, is attractive to the upper administration at my university. As most of you probably know, the brilliant financial success of the province in recent years has not been accompanied by corresponding rewards to the universities. Rather, severe cuts of the early 1990’s were followed by a gradual restoration of funding to previous levels and an insistence that further money would only be granted to innovative projects – a wasteful, divisive and discouraging measure. Presently, the University of Calgary is facing another budget crisis: according to the President’s office, a shortfall of millions of dollars per year. This problem is exacerbated by the tremendous growth of the city since the university’s founding and by the province’s insistence that universities must meet the local community’s demand for access. Under these conditions, and given the provincial government’s infatuation with novelty, it is entirely predictable that blended learning is viewed favourably by the upper administration and that Blackboard was chosen as a campus-wide platform to support it.

Rather like student-centred learning, blended learning offers the potential of supposed growth in class sizes, greater convenience for students, 24/7 access to important information, and a greater sense of participation and belonging in the resulting larger classes. And if these goals aren’t achieved, the professoriate can be held responsible; after all, they have been provided with a clever new technology and technical support through the Learning Commons. Blended learning, in conjunction with Blackboard, offers the administration a way of distancing itself from the very real teaching issues of an overextended institution. Information technology is being hailed as the solution to problems which, at least initially, were not perceived as having a technological basis. But in a province which has made a striking investment in the Alberta Supernet Project in order to give all schools, government offices and hospitals high-speed Internet access, it is hardly surprising that technology in itself is seen as a saviour.

IV. Attitudes to Technology

Though the specific technology is new, the attitude of the administration and the government is not. The official attitude to information technology is an optimistic and uncritical one, which essentially sees technology as a tool to improve all aspects of human life. A striking parallel can be found in John Sculley’s address to Educom in 1987, when, as CEO of Apple, he forecast that the widespread application of personal computers in higher education would create a new generation of life-long learners, create a second Renaissance, and unleash an unheard-of wave of prosperity not just for America but the world (Scully, in Kling 1991). In its assumption that progress (in this case educational progress) can be accomplished by technology alone, our administration is taking a utopian or technophilic perspective (Kling 1996, Tehranian 1990). This positive and simplistic approach is not new and did not begin with the first influx of Apple II’s into classrooms. Rather, as Hodas (1993) points out, every new electronic medium has initially been hailed as promising a new age for increasing the scope and availability of education and high culture to the populace, beginning with the earliest broadcasting through the telephone network and continuing through the educational appropriation of radio and television. But generally these ventures have not been successful, and new educational technologies have not become tightly integrated into the education system. Two commonly held explanations are that computers cannot transform education without a much greater financial and organizational commitment than institutions are willing to advance (Becker) or that computers will not succeed until teachers are persuaded that they are congruent with their vision of pedagogy and that they will not usurp their control over their classrooms and their students (Hodas). However, the present situation in many Canadian universities, where lack of resources is fueling interest and organizational commitment to the educational use of information technology, indicates that there is now an imperative to demonstrate the effectiveness of IT.

Bert will probably not object greatly to my depiction of institutional pressures and the promotion of IT as a solution to them, but we differ in our perspectives on educational computing. Following McLuhan, Bert takes a deterministic and optimistic approach to the impact of IT; focusing on the speed of computers, he sees them breaking the limitations of time and space, and inherently fostering connection. While I agree that speed is one of the important properties of the computer, I believe that computers are too complex a technology and are found in too many varied environments to have simple and consistent effects. Instead of determinism, my perspective on IT follows what Tehranian (1990) labels “technostructuralism”, the attitude that technology is not inherently good, bad or morally neutral, but rather that its impact will be shaped by the intentions of its designers and users. Further, as Raymond Williams (cited in Kline, Dyer-Witherford & DePeuter, 2003) observes, the effects of technology are contextual and will differ in different circumstances. From this perspective, it makes more sense to talk about technology in particular situations rather than in general, and although I am taking a critical approach to Blackboard, I am not condemning it.

V. Pedagogical Reasons for Refusing Technology

Its proponents argue that Blackboard is a powerful and flexible program that can enhance any class. A major part of its appeal is that it offers students 24/7 access to materials and services which previously only their instructor could provide. Using Blackboard, instructors can post lecture notes and assignments, make links to online articles, host discussion groups, and make students’ grades available. These kinds of abilities are obviously essential for blended learning, because students spend little time together in class and presumably have correspondingly little opportunity for assistance from their teachers. Ironically, in a traditional class setting such as GNST 341, in which students meet each week for three hours, the power of Blackboard may pose a dilemma for students and instructors.

Most students will probably have some reason to appreciate the convenience of looking up a lost assignment or reviewing the notes for a missed class. Those who are too shy to talk in class or who wish to continue a discussion after class may enjoy participating in a bulletin board. And students being human, who can resist the temptation to look up their present mark? Some features of Blackboard may cause stress, however. If instructors make extensive supplementary material available, the conscientious student may become overwhelmed. Similarly, if the bulletin board activity is assigned a mark for participation, it may become an unwelcome obligation, and if it isn't given credit, students may feel resentful that they are expected to use it. A program with the capacities of Blackboard may create pressure for already burdened students. And given the other communication channels available to them – phone, email, their instructor's homepage, MSN Instant Messenger – they may feel that they don't really need Blackboard.

For instructors, Blackboard may create some dilemmas. One involves how fully it is used. In my case, to use it only as a bulletin board would almost certainly cause students to wish more of its features to be employed and my refusal would probably reflect poorly on my ethos. Complying with this demand requires more time to learn and effectively use the program, time that I would rather spend developing course materials and working with students. More importantly, making full use of Blackboard's features leads in a direction that I wish to resist. Posting lecture notes and assignments, creating links to interesting additional materials, making grades available to students, and hosting and monitoring a bulletin board is not just a large time commitment. It also creates a virtual class which calls into question the validity and purpose of the physically and temporally situated class that meets three hours a week. One of Bert's students commented insightfully on this phenomenon in his concluding post concerning Blackboard when he stated that the program was wonderful because he only needed to come to class for midterms. One student is not going to make a major impact, but if a larger proportion of the class chooses not to attend, then the coherence and sense of community in the physical classroom will surely suffer.

My final concern has to do with the medium of electronic text, which is central to programs such as Blackboard. When we create an electronic extension or representation of a course, we do so through writing. But text, as Ong (1982) argues, is analytical, linear and isolating – in a word, cold - in contrast to the engaged, emotional and participatory lifeworld of orality. This criticism goes back to Plato's critique of writing in the *Phaedrus,* where he warns about the unresponsive nature of writing. A bulletin board discussion may indeed foster critical thinking, but it cannot duplicate the spoken exchange of ideas in a classroom. Enhancing the sense of community depends on speech, and programs like Blackboard are biased towards text, reinforcing the already strong dominance of artifacts such as the textbook.

Bert and I created this presentation as a debate, in order to dramatize the issues of the topic. But we are not as far apart as the format of the presentation suggests. I have attempted to demonstrate that computer technology, specifically course management programs such as Blackboard, requires a critical perspective, and is not an unmixed blessing. Deciding to adopt information technology or not should be done on a careful and specific case-by-case basis. And there are times when refusing technology is the right action, for ourselves and our students.

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Teaching reference format: A recipe swap and a rumination on research community

Doug Brent, University of Calgary

On one level, this piece falls into the genre of teacherly recipe swapping. I’d like to share with you a small assignment with which I’ve had more success than I had expected, in the hope that you may find some version of it useful in your own classes. However, I’d also like to spin out some larger implications of this little assignment which I hope will capture some of the larger implications of what we do when we try to introduce students to research.

The assignment is designed to teach reference list format. I use it to teach APA format, but it could be used to teach any format.

Before talking about “how,” I need to talk about “why”: that is, why spend class time on a set of artificial conventions when there are so many other things to learn? Part of my answer is that learning to follow a standard format helps students keep professors happy, and I don’t mean this to be flippant. Keeping professors happy is absolutely non-trivial in the lives of students who can be made to suffer in both obvious and subtle ways when their professors are unhappy. One sure way for students to make professors unhappy is to exhibit behaviour which marks them as outsiders to the academic community in which they will have to spend their lives for the next four or more years. We owe it to them to learn how to wear the badges of membership in our community.

But of course there is much more to it than that. Learning to wear “badges of membership” is merely a trivial and instrumental matter, unless they also know that those badges have a real purpose beyond simply marking people as “insiders” versus “outsiders.” Opening a discussion of referencing involves opening a discussion of what referencing *does*, a purpose which students find very difficult to articulate, let alone internalize.

Almost invariably, when I ask students why referencing is important, they respond that its purpose is to avoid being charged with plagiarism. This is indeed an important concern, for the academy is obsessed with plagiarism and it is proper that students know this. But in terms of learning how to engage with the ways knowledge is made in the academy, it is, in the end, a minor consideration – as Russ Hunt argues, perhaps even a dangerous red herring:

Scholars – writers generally – use citations for many things: they establish their own *bona fides* and currency, they advertise their allegiances, they bring the work of others to the attention of their readers, they assert ties of collegiality, they exemplify contending positions or define nuances of difference among competing theories or ideas. They do not use them to defend themselves against allegations of plagiarism. (See Russ Hunt’s "Two Cheers for Plagiarism.")

Referencing is the way in which academic works connect to each other – the hyperlinks of the academic community. We are all familiar with the experience of finding a good article on a subject in which we are interested, and following the references back and back (or forward, now that citation indexes are on line and therefore not an agonizing experience to use), and thereby finding our way into a web of conversation on a subject of importance. But students aren't. In my own research on student writing, I have very seldom heard a student describe following a trail of citation bread crumbs to find material. They tend to begin each search anew, using the search tools provided in overwhelming copiousness by the modern academic library, without seeing the lateral connections that embed each text in a larger conversation.

Perhaps most seriously, students are typically unable to see the possibility that their own texts might be valuable to others who want to follow the trail of their thoughts. This is not surprising, since their texts are almost always destined to be read only by the professor, who presumably knows it all already. Students, in short, don't see themselves as being part of a community of inquiry; they see their texts as dead ends. Therefore they don't take seriously the conventions of format that make references reliable guides for others who wish to find the same material. They honestly have little reason to care if they transpose some numbers or confuse the author of an article with the editor of the book in which it is found, thereby rendering the reference as unfollowable as a broken hyperlink.

So referencing is part of a much larger problem, which I attempt to address by designing the classroom as a collaborative community of inquiry in which both student and professional texts circulate in ways that make them both available to and genuinely useful to other students. You can see more of this macro-strategy on my web page at http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dabrent/art/acadcomm.htm; outside this larger context, micro-strategies of teaching referencing would be meaningless exercises in decontextualized skills. Right now, though, I'd like to focus in on this micro-strategy and argue that, in the context I have outlined above, it's more important than it might look.

Most students are confronted with the realities of documentation at the worst possible time: at the very end of a long and stressful session of writing a paper, usually one that is due the next day. At this point, any formal instruction that they might have received on the subject becomes irretrievable, and the supposedly simple handouts they have received become as meaningless as messages from Mars. Moreover, they can't care any more. All they want to do is get to bed before they have to drag themselves in the next morning. No wonder their reference lists are often an indecipherable home brew.

So I extract the process from this worst-case context and put it near the beginning of the course. At this point in the course they have done some preliminary library research to identify at least five sources that might be useful not only to them in their research papers but potentially to others in their writing group who are working on the same topic. I give them a four-page handout on APA style and the following instructions:

> Compile a **Reference List** of your five items in APA style. Make **five** copies of this reference list next day.
>
> Form ad hoc groups around similar topics, trade reference lists. In class, make editorial corrections to each others' reference lists to make them conform **perfectly** to APA style. Note any information that is missing (ie, that someone will have to hike back to the library for). At the end of the class make sure that the author gets a thoroughly marked-up copy back for editorial purposes.
>
> Revise your reference list as needed for submission next day. Marks start at 5/5. Each entry will lose .5 for a minor error (punctuation, order of name, etc) and the whole value for a major error (wrong order, information missing).

Note the extrinsic motivation – a very hard-ass marking scheme that is much more stringent than I would really use on a reference list attached to a fully dressed paper. I would rather they learn this skill on the basis of intrinsic motivation, but I know that it will take at least until the end of the course, and possibly the end of their academic careers, before they can begin to internalize the personal benefits of good references. So I use marks to focus their attention.

Second, I don't try to give them formal instruction in APA format – a sure-fire recipe for the world's most boring class. I just give them the handout and see what they can make of it on a "need to know" basis.

Third, I give them the opportunity to revise each other's lists. This seems fairly trivial, but I was amazed at the pedagogical mileage I was able to gain from the exercise. I use it in a first-year seminar with students who have no idea that they might genuinely be able to help each other learn. Typically they sit in their groups and gape at each other for several minutes: the instructions seem simple, but the concept is so foreign that the words don't penetrate. After a decent interval, during which I have helped them with the mechanics of making sure that each of them has one copy of all five of the lists (not a trivial matter in itself), I start to probe.

"Let's take a look at Chad's reference list. Does anyone see anything that could be improved?"

Silence. Eventually someone ventures, "Shouldn't the title of the book be *there* instead of *there*?"

"Congratulations," I enthuse. "You just got Chad half a mark. Now Chad, do you see anywhere that you can get Julie half a mark."

Quickly they catch on, and they are passing papers around the circle, wrestling together with the arcane intricacies of APA style. They still have trouble getting it right, of course, and not many people get a five out of five. (Nor of course would most of us – see Louis Menand's article "The Nightmare of Citation" at http://www.newyorker.com/critics/books/?031006crbo_books1 for a wry but oh-too-true look at the problems that beset any but the simplest citation.) But I notice that when their fully-dressed papers come in later in the course, their reference lists are immensely better than the ones I used to see.

That's reason enough for the assignment. But what I like the most about it is what else it tells students about collaboration. Sure, they are collaborating for extrinsic reward on an assignment that they have not yet come to appreciate as meaningful. But they realize, with a certain amount of surprise, that they can collaborate rather than compete, and can actually improve the quality of their product thereby. They can work together to solve problems, and thereby learn not just the intricacies of APA format but also the processes of problem-solving that allow them to use the raw material of the handout to solve their own dilemmas of formatting.

Thus the assignment, which occupies no more than fifty minutes of class time and perhaps an hour or two of homework, functions as an introduction in miniature to the culture of collaboration that I attempt to develop throughout the course. Later I can build on it to show students how mastery of this arcane code can help them use the references in published papers and in each other's shared texts to build their own repertoire of materials on their research topics, and thereby give them their first taste of what it's like to be in the middle of a web of shared knowledge rather than at a dead end.

I am struck by how much this exercise appears to contradict my own long-standing practice of teaching writing as a holistic entity rather than as a sum of atomistic parts. I would never dream of giving students worksheets on comma splices as opposed to commenting on the effectiveness of their drafts. So why am I comfortable lifting out the process of referencing as a separate skill? Partly it's because of the cognitive load issue I mentioned above – referencing is simply not learnable at the very end of a gruelling session of writing. But it's also because I want them to know some of these important micro-moves at the beginning of the process, when they are still engaged with their own research. I want to get them started on recognizing how these trails of breadcrumbs work to connect the texts they are reading, and to be able to use these techniques early in the course to create, for instance, working bibliographies that they can trade with each other and put to genuine use. This means that the assignment needs to be front-ended, even at the expense of being temporarily lifted out of context.

In miniature, then, this assignment brings forward many of the hidden dilemmas of what we do. Most writing instructors, consciously or not, tend to dismiss referencing as a relatively trivial matter, something that students should really be able to figure out for themselves by following some "simple" handouts. I argue that the mechanics are not that simple, and that, moreover, the mechanics are only the tip of the documentation iceberg. What's under the water, unless we roll the iceberg over so that students can take a look, is the web of interconnections between texts that makes what we do an active knowledge-making system rather than a storehouse of disconnected texts.

Learning to inkshed: Learning to belong

Miriam Horne, Concordia and McGill Universities

When my students are feeling nervous and anxious on the first day of classes, or about an oral presentation they have to do, I talk to them about nerves and about being shy. I leave them incredulous when I tell them that I am shy. Despite the fact that I can stand in front of a group of people and speak with little effort, if I am inside that same group of people and asked to be a regular participant, I shrivel inside myself. It seems odd then that I have taken so passionately to inkshedding--for both the activity and the community invoke the anxiety that breeds with my shyness. Yet inkshedding and Inkshed also manage to pull me out of my shell and give me a place to belong. When I first began looking at inkshedding for my PhD research, I wanted to know why it worked. I think that somehow I believed I would uncover a magical formula that would inspire composition instructors the world over. I have found, instead, an understanding of my relationship with the activity and the community. They teach me how, and give me a place to belong.

My first inkshedding experience came in one of my first courses at McGill as a masters' student. I was in the midst of the terrible loneliness that accompanies moving to a new city and taking on something new, a broken heart, and general insecurities about my abilities to meet the demands of graduate school. One of my elective courses was "Writing across the curriculum" with Anthony Paré. For comfort's sake, he held the class in the basement of Thomson House (the graduate student club) where we sat in small groups around tables. (This was, in fact, not very comfortable for me since it meant I *had* to actually participate in conversations instead of remaining quietly anonymous.) After a few weeks of the course I was just beginning to participate in small group discussions and talk to people during the break and before class. One evening Anthony came to class and asked us to do a freewrite in response to an article he had given us to read by Pat Sadowy (if memory serves, it was about getting students to write more and getting around the problem of correction and meaningful feedback by training TA's to give feedback). To sit in class and write a response to this article sent me into a cold sweat. A knot of fear took over my stomach. What if I didn't write the "right" thing? The intimidation of the blank page was tremendous. At least at home I had privacy for my insecurity. I didn't have the luxury of talking to myself, visiting the refrigerator or other such strategies I was used to at home. In this setting, others would actually see me write. Somehow that carried an added burden. I needed to write something significant. I drew on the only weapon that had protected me as a student, to be a critic. Based on everything I knew about being a TA as an undergraduate, I found everything wrong with Sadowy's article I could, and filled my page with criticisms.

While intuitively I realized that some purpose for this in-class writing had to exist, the discomfort of the writing task encompassed me too much to think of anything but writing. But once Anthony explained what we were to do with our texts, the writing part seemed miniscule. The monumental task that he asked us to do, that sent me into a virtual panic, was to take what we had written and pass it two people to the right. He explained that we were to read each other's texts, mark anything that stood out to us with a line in the margin, and then pass the paper on doing the same thing with other papers until ours returned. My panic now stemmed not just from my insecurities about writing, but also from an irrational fear I had of people reading my writing (much like how most people respond to public speaking)—especially in front of me where there was no way to hide. I felt that my classmates were sure to laugh at me and realize my terrible secret: I wasn't really good enough to be there with them.

Under the circumstances, however, I had no choice but to comply and pass my paper on. I focused on the paper in front of me and tried not to follow the progress of my paper around the table. In doing so, I noticed two things. First, the discomfort of some of the other students matched my own. I received the writing from my colleague beside me with an apology from her that had she known it would be read she would have written something better. Around the table there were squirms and giggles of discomfort as papers were passed two people to the right. I was not alone. Second, I was so uncomfortable at having my writing read that I found I was reading with a great deal more sympathy and attentiveness to what worked in these particular texts than I might otherwise have had. To that point, I had been extremely critical of everything I was reading for classes: my weapon. It was, after all, easier to critique than to say something new that might be wrong. But in this reading and writing activity, I found that I was not reading to be critical, but reading to make connections and support those in anguish like me.

I don't remember Anthony using the term at the time, but I now understand this activity is known as inkshedding. The experience stayed with me. Such trauma is not easily forgotten. Yet it is not so much the trauma I remember now, as the fact that I lived through it. Despite my discomfort, I pushed through. Someone on "the Wall" (part of a collaborative retrospective at Inkshed 20) wrote, "You/one can feel outside of the subtle tightness of inkshedding. It takes confidence to take part." Indeed, this is the insecurity I felt with all my writing—that I was on the outside. But somehow, because of the structure of the inkshed activity, I pushed through and took part.

In the end, inkshedding pushed me so far out of my original realm and came to be so much a part of me that I chose to pursue a study of it for my PhD. I was, however, unprepared for the other Inkshed I would meet in this pursuit, and realize that my experience was the same: fear--fear of the blank page, fear of the reader—, fear of jumping in, and realizing the reward at the end. At the start of my PhD process, I thought that inkshedding referred to the activity I have described in which students respond in a freewrite to a text and then pass their writing around. Students respond to each other's writings. But inkshed also refers to a group of people who practice inkshedding. After deciding to study what I originally thought was the act of inkshedding for my PhD, I realized that I would have to meet people in this community, attend their conferences, and try to understand their connection with the action of inkshedding.

That fear of the blank page, the unknown, the joining in a conversation almost overwhelmed me, and I thought about giving up the whole endeavor before it really began. Before attending my first conference I spoke to Anthony about my fear of approaching and attempting to join CASLL. I explained that all my experience and all my knowledge about this group of people told me that they would be nice to me, but I was petrified. He laughed and told me that it would be fine. He said that some people had described certain people in the group as "tweed jackets," but that it was really an anticonference I was going to. He waxed a little romantic about walks in the woods, long talks, and other wonderful things. But to myself I remained skeptical thinking, “Sure, that’s fine if you happen to be Anthony Paré, but this is me!” Nevertheless, I packed my bags and headed off.

I can still remember the anxious knot in my stomach as I neared the Inn where the conference was to be held. How on earth was I going to do this! I checked into the hotel. The folders and bags for the conference were all set out on a table, but there was no one in sight, so I gathered my things and headed for my room. As I walked down the hall I saw a man and a woman coming from the opposite direction. When they got near enough I realized the man’s nametag said Russ Hunt. Now I had had pleasant email contact with Russ already; I knew I would need to get to know him and that he would be an invaluable source in my research. But at that particular moment I wanted to walk right on by and pretend I didn’t know him (after all, I didn’t really know him yet). It took all my courage in that split second decision to take the text already created by my entry into the PhD program and throw it into “the pot” to be read by all. I introduced myself. “Nice to meet you” he said.

After sitting in my room for a while and feeling anxious, I ate a huge chocolate bar to soothe my nerves, then I forced myself to knock on the door of the adjoining room and ask my next door neighbour (who I met briefly and with great discomfort when walking into my room) if she wanted to go down to supper together. She agreed (to my great relief) and we headed back to the main building of the inn. On our walk down I learned that this was her first time at an Inkshed conference too, and got the impression that she was just as uncomfortable in joining this conversation as I was. I was glad to know I wasn’t the only one. We arrived at the main building and found a group of people congregated on the patio outside. We walked out to the group.

In my limited experience with professional and academic conferences, it is easy to remain anonymous. You can go and never talk to anyone. If you slip away or miss a session, no one will notice your absence. Not so at Inkshed. When we walked onto the patio a woman came rushing up to us saying we didn’t have updated schedules and passed them on to us. We found a place to sit and all the people in the vicinity introduced themselves and asked about us. Yes, I felt awkward, but I was impressed by the effort and made an effort myself.

Shortly after we arrived and were chatting, Ann Beer arrived. Ann is a long time inkshedder and one of the people in whose class I have shed ink. With her coming an interesting thing happened and I don’t know how it would have played out had she not been there. But as she was bustling around greeting people who were around me, she introduced me to them again—not as Miriam from Concordia (as I had been identified, since that's what my nametag said) but as Miriam who is doing her PhD on Inkshedding with Anthony. By the time we went into the dining room twenty minutes later I was meeting new people who responded, "oh, you're the one doing your PhD on inkshedding." Her introductions ensured I was in the pot, where my timid greetings may not have ensured this so early in my inkshed community experience[1].

I found the introduction to the inkshed community much like my experience with the inkshed activity. I had to first create a text—face the blank page. Then I had to throw it into the pot to the mercies of the group. The text that arrived at the conference that day was me, created, informed, and written on by my life experience in general and more specifically by my new PhD pursuit. When I embarked on my study, I knew I would be "read"—frightening, but had to happen. Arriving at the Inn and registering I threw myself in the pot to be read, to read others, and to await the outcome.

The night that I sat so miserably in Anthony's classroom reading other people's texts with respect and interest, they were doing the same to mine. My text went around the table, classmates read it, interacted with it, and arrived at an understanding. As Bakhtin describes, the language was negotiated through writer, text and reader and the parts that had meaning stood out with the markings. Today, I don't remember what the markings on my page were, exactly, but I remember a sense of surprise at the respect and communication that took place. My miserable discomfort changed to relief, surprise, and pleasant satisfaction. Sumara (1998) writes about marking of a text and how a text can equally mark the reader. I think this reciprocity is true of inkshedding also. Just as my inkshed text in Anthony's class circulated to be read and marked, the text of Miriam circulated, was read and marked on in the Inkshed community so that I left the conference in a very different way than I arrived.

The second day of the conference, I attended sessions, met new people, continued to be introduced to people, and inkshed with people. Inkshedding with people who were the voices behind so much of what I was reading made the inkshed experience even more intimidating—these were the "real" voices in the conversation. How could I inkshed with them? My fears had to be sidelined. I inkshed. After a session on story telling I found that my inkshed touched on many of the same feelings as others at my table—the struggle between boundaries of being a "teacher" and the humanness that requires human interaction. I felt connected with my group. At another session I found myself inkshedding with Russ Hunt. I was really nervous about that one, especially because I found one of the presenters surprising in what he said, almost antithetical to what I believed about writing. Had I misunderstood? Was I doing something wrong? I didn't know how to inkshed about his presentation. I didn't want to write anything that might be "wrong" that Russ would read. So I didn't write about that presentation—only the two others that went in the same ninety-minute period. I saw what Russ wrote. He mirrored what I had thought. My thoughts were validated.

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[1] I have noticed that during inkshed activity when there is a particularly startling or stunning inkshed, for whatever reason, and the reader giggles or laughs or comments or otherwise draws attention to the text, others are more eager to get their hands on it. This does not devalue the others. It merely intensifies the interaction with the one. I felt like that text.

Inkshedding was only one of the ways I was marked during my circulation. The second night of the conference, we were surprised with free time. To my amazement I found myself (as Anthony had promised) on a long walk in the woods deeply engaged in a conversation about the educational system in the Ukraine, its struggle since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the volunteers teaching there. Later that evening amidst scrabble and beer, I was even invited to join two "old timers" in their walk.

On Saturday morning I started down to the main building on my own. One of the organizers was quite a way ahead of me. To my surprise, she stopped and waited for me to catch up. We talked about inkshedding. When she opened the session later that morning she began with "we need to inkshed more so Miriam can see how it's done." I felt again like the text that had been singled out.

One of the most powerful markings on me took place on Saturday night. We all boarded an old yellow school bus and drove to one of the participant's homes for dinner. Amid the wine, beer and mineral water, I mingled and grazed. I watched how one participant repeatedly isolated himself from the rest of the group by physically moving apart and how others continued to keep him in the group by occasionally pulling him into the conversations going on around him. I sat and swapped stories of schooling, mothering, and feelings about inkshedding. This was followed by a talent show—another aspect of the conference that sets it apart from traditional academia. I was roaring with laughter with the rest of the group as Roger Graves--PhD, keynote speaker of the conference--mimicked Red Green teaching writing, community jokes that only inkshedders would know. I cheered with the others at a gymnastics routine. I can still envision the image of an iguana created in my mind by a poem recited about a teaching experience.

And then came Susan Drain.

First she decried war in a way that reflected an era I was a generation too late to be part of, but always felt I belonged to. Then she sang. And after a few lines she had us all holding hands and singing with her, "last night I dreamed the strangest dream…"

In order to understand the experience and the profundity of the moment, I think I need to explain a little about my own life experience which is inextricably bound with how I have come to experience the whole. I was born and raised in a liberal but fully active Mormon family. As a result of my participation in this religious community, I grew up with an absolutist position on life. Right and wrong were supposed to be black and white, and the nature of God was clearly defined and *true*. As I said, mine was a liberal family—at least, intellectually. This meant that I had a lot of questions and often was left unsatisfied but quiet about the nature of my faith. Not until life began to happen to me as an adult did I begin to understand the concepts of social constructionism which are so antithetical to the absolutist community to which I belong. With this background, understand too that specific feelings and experiences that I related to those particular feelings were identified by my religious training as "spiritual." These "spiritual" experiences are given to somehow testify of God, or some aspect of God. Therefore, any occurrence of these particular feelings that had been defined as spiritual was a manifestation of the truth of God. All my spiritual experiences, while varied, took place within some kind of Mormon related context. Therefore, these experiences manifested the truth of the Mormon experience and therefore the truth of the Mormon God.

On that Saturday night as I sat in a crowded living room holding hands with a group of slightly intoxicated intellectuals, the feelings I had were welcome and familiar, but completely unexpected and out of context. Yet, it was no less a spiritual experience than other experiences of the same nature, even if there was no Mormon in sight. How to explain or describe the feelings that made the experiences so spiritual? Impossible to put into words, but it gave me new insight on spiritual experiences. (Of course it has taken a year since mulling over this to figure it out.) It's no longer (for me) about manifesting or witnessing the truth of something. There's too much implication there for a static and unchanging truth which is really culturally defined. But what I have come to realize on my reflection of this and other spiritual experiences is that they have all been a reminder to me that I am part of something, I am not an isolated organism, but a part of something much larger than myself. In my journal that night I wrote, "The whole of this group is much larger and significant than any one individual (even Russ Hunt.) I feel I have place here. I feel I belong. The power of the whole is astonishing."

A few weeks after the first inkshedding experience with Anthony, he arrived in class with a stack of Inkshed newsletters. In it were several responses to Pat Sadowy's article. Included was an excerpt from mine. Following was another article by Sadowy responding by name to our responses. Somehow, I had managed to jump into that ongoing conversation. To find my voice. To participate. To my amazement, my voice was heard, recognized and valued. I was part of a conversation larger than myself.

When I left the conference Sunday morning, I was reeling. It took the full six hour drive home to re-emerge into the "real" world. But I took home with me several precious things. First was the assurance that "The Wall" would be passed on to me to do something with. This reflected to me the trust that the community had in me. Second, many hugs from people who were strangers only a few days before showed me that I had managed to join in a conversation. But most of all, I left with the feeling that I was part of something. I had found my place.

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Minutes of the CASLL Annual General Meeting, May 9, 2004

Inkshed 21, Kamloops, BC

Present: Kathryn Alexander, Anne Loxley Baker, Doug Brent, Cindy Carpino, Rick Coe, Jan Duerden, Will Garrett-Petts, Janet Giltrow, Christina Halliday, Wendy Harris, Miriam Horne, Henry Hubert, Anne Hunt, Russ Hunt, Keith Johnson, Sharon Josephson, Jaime MacKinnon, Shurli Makmillen, Kenna Manos, Jane Milton, Ted Morrison, Rachel Nash, David G. Nimmo, Katharine Patterson, Matt Peebles, Krista Percosky, Jane Powell, Lil Rodman, J. Barbara Rose, Pat Saunders, Tania Smith, Stephanie Spehar, Tracy Stewart, Wendy Strachan, Sunny Sun, Tosh Tachino, Tatiana Teslenko, Brenda Thompson, Jacqueline Turner, Kathy Voltan, Bonnie Waterstone, Tracy Whalen, Diana Wegner, Lynne Wiltse, Yaying Zhang (plus two individuals whose signatures could not be deciphered)

Chair: Leslie Sanders

Secretary: Brock MacDonald

1. The minutes of the Annual General Meeting of May 2003 were approved (moved by Barbara Rose, seconded by Kenna Manos).

2. Kenna Manos presented the Treasurer's Report:

Balance forward from May 8, 2003..	**2421.99**

Income:	2003 dues paid at Inkshed 20................................	721.10	
	Reimbursement from Inkshed 20 start-up costs (profit: 887.56)…..	4887.56	
	2004 dues received by May 7................................	81.40	
Expenses:	Travel grants to grad students		
	Inkshed 20..	759.89	
Total income...			**8112.05**
Total expenses...			**759.89**
BALANCE...			**7352.16**

The Treasurer's report was approved (moved by Henry Hubert, seconded by Wendy Strachan).

3. Kenna Manos reminded the graduate students at the conference to apply for the subsidies, and urged all members to encourage grad students in their institutions to consider attending future Inksheds. She also thanked this year's Organizing Committee for a job well done; general applause.

4. Election of a new Treasurer. Jane Milton volunteered to take the position; there were no other candidates; acclaimed. Leslie Saunders expressed the membership's thanks to Kenna Manos for the outstanding job she has done in her time as Treasurer.

5. New Editor for Inkshed Newsletter. Roger and Heather Graves volunteered to take the over editing the Newsletter; there were no other candidates; acclaimed. Jane Milton noted that the call for papers for this year's Spring issue was sent out on the listserve some time ago, and urged members to contribute. She expressed thanks to Russ Hunt for his assistance with the Newsletter and the CASLL website and listserve. Leslie Sanders thanked Jane for the excellent work she has done as Newsletter Editor, and reminded the membership that Russ is in the process of archiving all the past Newsletter issues in PDF format on-line; Russ added that the complete run will be available soon.

6. Location and theme for Inkshed 22. Pat Saunders, Kenna Manos and Jane Milton volunteered to host next year's Inkshed in Halifax. General discussion of a possible theme followed. Russ Hunt suggested that audience role and response was an area that needs attention. Pat Saunders added that this would be particularly important if we focused on professional writing. Jane Milton said that a number of specific questions about defining audience could be our theme. Pat suggested that the phrase "writing for others" might allow us to pull the questions together. Leslie Sanders agreed, and noted that we would want to attend to the effects of class diversity, cultural backgrounds and traditions, and degrees of fluency on various "others;" writing is always "others writing to others." Shurli Makmillen pointed out that writing can be local, or can function in broader areas or in global terms, and suggested we make use of the phrase "horizons

of writing;" she thought that a focus on audience alone would be limiting. After some further general discussion, it was resolved (moved Leslie Sanders, seconded Brock MacDonald) that next year's organizers would develop the conference call working with all these ideas.

7. Other Business. The current state of the CASLL Board was discussed; there was no need for new Board members at this time, according to Russ Hunt.

   Russ reminded everyone of the importance of being on the CASLL listserve, and urged members who have not signed on to do so. Rachel Nash added that a good deal of information about this year's conference arrangements had only been available to those on the list; problems arose in some cases for those not in the know, so she urged people to avoid this in future by signing on.

8. The meeting was adjourned (moved by Jamie MacKinnon, seconded by Miriam Horne).