Inkshed Online Newsletter, June 2014

This is a rich and varied newsletter, just what you need for summer reading. It starts with an important and useful piece where Doug Brent reviews what writing studies can learn from librarians about teaching information literacy. Then it glitters with reflections of the dynamic Inkshed 30 conference, with pieces that display responses to the plenary talk, report amusingly on experiments with technology in a writing centre, and address problems with teaching writing in other people's classrooms. It wouldn't be Inkshed without some self-questioning too: do we really need so many writing-studies conferences each spring? The capstone is the minutes of the 2014 AGM, which reveal among other tidbits the location of next year's conference(s).

ARTICLES:

Learning from Librarians: What Writing Studies Can Learn from Literature on Information Literacy

by Doug Brent, University of Calgary

A Presentation to the Campus Alberta Writing Studies Symposium, April 25, 2014

Some years ago, I began investigating literature relevant to First Year Seminars. One of the major goals of a First Year Seminar is to introduce students to the general mindset of the academic research community by engaging them in introductory level academic research, so I found myself ferreting out research articles on the subject. In addition to a number of studies in

the writing studies literature, I found a wealth of studies in the literature of academic librarianship, also variously called Information Literacy and Bibliographic Instruction.

At a conference on the First Year Experience, I summarized the general tone of this literature by saying, "I discovered that academic librarians, on the whole, are desperate and despairing people." A ripple of applause broke out from one corner of the room, which turned out to be occupied by a contingent of academic librarians who had turned up to participate in the conversation on first year seminars. I began to suspect that I was onto something.

Academic librarians are desperate and despairing primarily because they have vivid first-hand experience of how little most students understand about research, and are given, at best, a one-hour window in a library orientation session to try to teach it to them. Of course, this sort of context-free introduction leaves little or no impression, and librarians are left trying to teach these skills on the fly when students, come up to them and say something like, "I need to find five good sources on cancer. By Friday."

I suspect that the switch to using on-line sources has likely made the problem even worse by enabling students to write research papers without physically setting foot in the library. As a result, students needing guidance are even less likely to strike up a conversation with the human being sitting behind the reference desk. They are more likely to struggle on their own, and may not receive any additional guidance until they get a paper back with feedback pointing out how badly they have missed a mark that they never knew existed.

In this paper I will argue for more *rapprochement* between the Writing Studies and the Academic Librarianship communities, especially with regard to research findings about what students need to know about the process of research. There has been some attempt from the library side to introduce librarians to the writing studies literature: articles with title like "Communicating with Writing Instructors" and "Encouraging Dialogue between Composition and Bibliographic Instruction" appear sporadically in the library journals, although even these attempts seem slightly fraught. In a personal communication, Barbara Fister, one of the champions of this rapprochement, wrote,

I'm a librarian with a rhetorical turn and have been trying to persuade my colleagues who teach library research skills that research is recursive, not linear, and is entwined in reading and writing, not the first step. I've not got very far.

There seems even less going the other way. Rabinowitz writes gloomily that "Despite striking similarities in results, there has been little exchange of knowledge or effort at creating shared research agendas between the two groups of researchers. Pedagogical literature about library research written by classroom faculty reveals serious misconceptions about the role of librarians in the student research process" (337).

I'm not sure that the situation is really as bad as all that. However, I think that we could profit from a review of how the issue of student research is seen by the library community. Of course, we in Writing Studies may take some comfort in the fact that we are likely not the sole or even main problem. Neither our literature nor the Bibliographic Instruction literature is much read by instructors in the disciplines, who assign the vast majority of research papers that librarians have to deal with. But it is still more than worth our while to become more familiar with how things look from the other side of the "supply side" reference desk.

Unfortunately, a lot of the library literature gives a very clear and crisp view of the problems, but is somewhat quieter with regard to solutions. However, we are closer to a solution when we can see more clearly what happens to students when they enter the bewildering wilderness of secondary sources.

Sonia Bodi's article "How Do We Bridge the Gap between What We Teach and What They Do? " speaks to the wide gap between the research processes of faculty members and those used by most students. She points out that scholars' search strategies are shaped by three important resources that students simply do not have available.

The first is a deep and thorough knowledge of a field, which can helps them know where the most important sources may be hiding and, more importantly, help them sift the useful from the irrelevant.

The second is time. Although we too have deadlines and conflicting demands, it may take several years for one of our research projects to mature from incipient idea to published paper, often with several rounds of peer review and revision. Students, if they are lucky, have a few weeks.

The third is the maturity and experience to cope with ambiguity and self-doubt. Bodi writes, "[Expert researchers] are gratified to find nothing written on their topic; students are devastated." (110)

The result is that few students actually search in the systematic way that they have been taught either in writing courses or in library workshops. Instead, "it appears that students search in a haphazard, unplanned way, happy to find whatever." (110) My own research on first-year students corroborates this. I found that very few students report using a good source as a gateway to others like it. Relatively few reported following back the trails of breadcrumbs in the references, and absolutely none reported any systematic means of searching sideways to find other sources like the one they have just found. Rather, they start each search as if it is a totally new one. plugging search terms back into a database in hope of finding more useful bits of material.

The problem is that there is no good way, other than experience, that will make available to students the key resources that scholars have available. So how do we proceed with students who need to know far more than we can teach them?

Bodi suggests pitching bibliographic instruction very low, recognizing that students are more in need of coping strategies than complex information-seeking strategies. She gives a few basic lists of heuristic questions that can help students over difficult hurdles such as focussing their topic, finding appropriate key words, and evaluating sources, especially web sites. I won't go over these in detail here. I just want to emphasize the importance of starting small and giving students a few tips that will help them shape their desperate searches. Students simply don't have the time, let alone the disciplinary knowledge and maturity, that will allow them to search the way we do, so it might be best to lower expectations a bit and design instruction that will help them survive.

Another recurring theme in the bibliographic literature is library anxiety. Carol Kuhlthau helpfully localizes the specific point in the research process where overwhelming anxiety is likely to erupt: at the stage of focussing the topic. Kuhlthau used a variety of qualitative methods to capture regularities in student search strategies. Although there was huge individual variety, she found that the process tended to fall into six broad stages:

- task initiation

- topic selection

- prefocus exploration

- focus formulation,

- information collection

- search closure.

(As an aside, it is interesting that "search closure," the point at which students feel that they have enough sources and start to write, is where we in Writing Studies often direct the most attention. If nothing else, this reinforces the fact that we and the librarians are holding opposite ends of the same stick.)

Kuhlthau found that anxiety seemed to peak at in-between stages. For instance, there was a clear peak between task initiation – basically, receiving the assignment – and choosing a topic.

One student revealed, "When I first hear about an assignment, personally I just get upset." Another described feeling "a spontaneous kind of fear." A student noted this to be a common experience among fellow students: "In the real beginning I guess I was like everyone else. I didn't know what I wanted to do . . . I felt anxious."

As soon as students selected a topic, uncertainty decreased and so did the anxiety. Unfortunately, it rose again when they started doing exploratory reading prior to finding a focus. I guess we should be thankful that her subjects actually did do exploratory reading rather than finding a thesis and then looking for sources to support it. But it is useful to note that this stage was a source of even bigger anxiety as students became overwhelmed by the sheer amount of incompatible material available.

One student declared, "I was so confused up until the 25th. I had no idea what direction I was going in." Another recalled, "I felt kind of blind because I didn't know what I was looking for." A third said, "It seemed there was so much to do, it really scared me."

This is the stage at which some students become so desperate that they change topic completely, which doesn't help much if it just puts them back at the beginning of the process again. However, Kuhlthau found that if students do find a clear focus for their research, it represented a turning point in their experience. Anxiety abated, replaced with a feeling of relief and cautious optimism.

This study can inform our practice in Writing Studies by suggesting the point at which some helpful intervention, perhaps by way of a personal conference, can be the most helpful. Most students voluntarily come for a conference when they want feedback on a rough draft. Kuhlthau's work suggests that this is too late, as the worst period of uncertainty and anxiety may already be past. It will be helpful to require written proposals that present not only a topic but also a preliminary focus. As long as we are prepared to tolerate a fair bit of vagueness regarding the focus, the proposal stage can help us identify students who are thrashing around at this critical stage and may be in need of some personal reassurance and advice.

A third "must read" article from the Bibliographic Instruction literature is Jane Keefer's "The Hungry Rats Syndrome: Library Anxiety, Information Literacy and the Academic Reference Process." This article continues the discussion on library anxiety by referring to a classic experiment by Blumer. Two groups of rats were trained to navigate a maze to find a food reward. (Already sounds a lot like an undergraduate in the library, no?.) Then the rats were seaparated into two groups. One group ran the maze when well-fed. The other group was deprived of food for thirty-six hours before tackling the maze. The heighted drive to find food, any food, as quickly as possible seemed to disturb the second group's cognitive skills to the extent that they seemed to forget much of what they knew about the maze, and they fared much worse than the first group.

The lesson is obvious. The desperate state that students can easily get into, needing sources with neither the time nor the experience to do so properly, can make them clutch at any sources that seem remotely relevant. If nothing else, this should make us more sympathetic,

but it should also propel us to design writing assignment differently, so students are less likely to be forced into this counter-productive state of hyper-anxiety.

The last study I'll point to gives some concrete ideas on how to do this. In "Desperately Seeking Citations." Gloria Leckie reports the same constellation of problems that most of the library literature does, but focuses squarely on the one that is most within the control of the faculty member: the assignment.

Leckie singles out assignments that require students to become familiar with a wide variety of important and unfamiliar concepts at once. She describes a student in a second-year course in resource management who turned up in the library bearing the following assignment:

Choose one of the following topics:

- Biodiversity;
- Ocean pollution;
- Transportation of hazardous wastes;
- Desertification; or
- The Tropical rainforest.

In your paper, discuss:

- The nature of the issue;
- Its natural/biophysical aspects;
- What has been done on the issue since 1980;
- What is being done on the issue currently. (203)

An experienced scholar would know how to do this: read around in the general area, get a sense of where the topic might be going and focus it, find the most important studies on "what has been done on the issue since 1980," figure out which important names come up, and so on. The problem for students is that they need to master a huge number of skills more or less at once. However, none of these is made explicit in the assignment, which simply assumes that students will have some idea of how to do this, and in what order. No wonder Kuhlthau found huge peaks of anxiety.

Leckie doesn't suggest that either writing teachers or instructors in the disciplines can teach all of these skills explicitly. Rather, she suggests a radical reformation of the assignment to permit what she calls a "stratified methodology." The assignment is broken up into sequential components that ask students to focus on learning only one new task at a time. Of course, some of these steps still contain an immense number of subtasks—one step, for instance, is "finding and using scholarly literature," which alone could be the subject of many courses. But at least instructors could guide students through more manageable chunks of the process rather than simply turning them loose in the library.

Lest anyone think that this 1996 paper is dated, Lisa Rose-Wiles and Melissa M. Hofmann published a paper in 2013 called "Still Desperately Seeking Citations." You probably won't be surprised to learn that on-line resources have only made it much easier and quicker for students to get in over their heads.

In this brief review of the bibliographic instruction literature, I haven't tried to be exhaustive. Mostly I wanted to pick out a few examples to show that there are many people out there asking many of the same pedagogical questions that we do, and that these folks can do a lot to inform the ways we develop assignments and help students become familiar with the research process. If we needed any convincing, this literature should underline how overwhelming the process of research can be to undergraduates, and how many layers are in even a seemingly simple assignment. It is also helpful to graze through this literature for ideas on assignment design and ways in which we can engage more closely with our colleagues in the library. But mostly, it can provide reassurance that, if we are tempted to despair at the amateurish research papers we often receive, we are not alone.

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What Inkshed 30 Talked About

True to the Inkshed tradition, the conference in Waterloo on May 28 was a day for talking and reflecting, with ideas about writing and writing instruction expressed in a wide range of presentations, discussions, and written responses. Kim Garwood not only helped organize the event, but also made an instant collage of keywords from inksheds responding to the plenary talk by Vershawn Ashanti Young on the value of code-meshing in language use.

Technology Coming Through the WLU Writing Centre

An Inkshed 30 presentation by Jordana Garbati, Haydn Lawrence, and Boba Samuels, Wilfrid Laurier University

Fulfilling the conference theme of taking risks, a group from Wilfrid Laurier University outlined recent experiments with technology in their writing centre. Examples include a website redesign, the introduction of a twitter feed and a tutor-generated blog for publicity, development of a free smartphone app for vocabulary development, and the switch to WCOnline for scheduling appointments. Besides amusing and informative visuals, the slides linked below will show you the research and theory underlying these innovations, with a useful reference list at the end.

PRESENTATION SLIDES: Beep, Beep! Technology Coming Through

Bespoke Writing Instruction: Tailoring Student Workshops to Fit

Note by Margaret Procter as conference participant

Sample instructional material by Nancy Johnston and Sarah King, University of Toronto Scarborough, and Allyson Skene, University of Windsor

The first session in Inkshed 30 engaged us immediately in a challenging learning activity — making us practice the participatory learning that some us of preach, and enacting the conference theme of taking risks. As the presenters noted, in-class workshops in disciplinary courses are a popular means of supporting student writing. But these workshops risk becoming overly generic, reducing disciplinary and genre variety to homogenized advice, especially if the course instructors treat the writing specialists as visitors rather than collaborators. The fast-moving session immersed us in a classic situation of this kind, and asked us to find ways to avoid the pitfalls and make the most of the teaching opportunity. In so doing, we also found empathy for the risks students face in courses where writing instruction is an add-on. The handouts for this session are linked here as an indication of the breadth and richness of discussion that ensued.

"Their writing on the mid-term was awful," says the course instructor in the given scenario. "Please come to class and tell them how to do better on the final project. Cover whatever you want." The roomful of writing instructors of course burst into a flood of questions they would want to ask the instructor about the course and the assignment, a flood that took elegant shape in a sheet provided by Nancy and Sarah before we broke into small groups to tackle the situation. Their handout organizes likely concerns into a checklist of issues to raise with course instructors, and tabulates the potentials of using different kinds of writing samples to demonstrate expectations. HANDOUT: Some Considerations for Tailoring Workshops

The scenario was a large first-year Biology course where students are given scholarly articles as context for the experimental work in their labs, and then write up a capstone lab report that includes a synthesis of their reading. Participants were handed a package replicating student material to help us see the course context. Reading the assignment prompt, not to mention its elaborate accompanying rubric, and glancing at the types of articles students were expected to master, many of us felt daunted — just as students would. It was reassuring, however, to be taken through a sample workshop activity (prepared and used by Allyson Skene in 2011) that set out three short excerpts from scholarly articles about the hawk moth and asked us to work in small groups to make simple annotations, focussing initially on variations in terminology used. The tasks weren't all that hard, and things started to make sense. HANDOUT: Sample Workshop Activity

To reassure us further, we were then shown a one-page excerpt from another published article that wove together all three of our excerpts to indicate what was known about a specific element of hawk moth behaviour and what needed to be further investigated. The synthesis made clear sense as the introduction to an article about new research — and exemplified the structure, language, and referencing practices needed for the introduction to the dreaded final lab report. It could be done! HANDOUT: Sample Model Activity

This experience led to a lively discussion about sustainable and effective outreach teaching. There was general agreement that the focus on reading and on vocabulary was practical to teach and very useful to students. The models fulfilled many needs, including that of showing dramatically what was really done in the discipline, not just talking about what an assignment demanded. Several people affirmed how important it was to engage the course instructor and teaching assistants as fully as possible in preliminary planning as well as the in-class event. Longterm effects on assignment design and curriculum planning were also mentioned – hopefully, but now with practical material and a sense of accomplishment to bolster those hopes.

An Open Letter: Why There are Three Conferences

by Theresa Hyland, Huron University College

[Intro note by Margaret Procter, Inkshed Newsletter moderator]

In early June, after a full week of writing-studies conferences, an attendee at the Canadian Writing Centres Association emailed the past CWCA chairs with thanks for an excellent conference–but also asking why there had to be three in a row each year and not just one.

> I'm wondering whether you two have any insight into the nature of the relationship between the CWCA, CASDW, and Inkshed. It strikes me that a single Canadian association of writing research, teaching, and practice would be beneficial for a number of reasons, including a consolidated membership and website, and a single annual conference with SIGs for individual interest groups. A consolidated organization might have more potential for international recognition. I'm thinking of American examples like the CCC or the NCTE….

That's a question that comes up periodically, perhaps most often with Inkshed, the oldest organization but now the smallest of the conferences. The outgoing CWCA chair Theresa Hyland offered to share her response with Inkshed newsletter readers—which in itself makes the point that Inkshed is a good place to think about hard questions.

Here is Theresa's answer. Would you give a different one, or would you continue to wonder? Please use the Comment box at the end of the piece to add your perspective. [MP]

June 6, 2014

Hi! I think your idea is not an unreasonable one, but let me take a minute to explain why and how the three conferences developed, and, possibly, why they should continue to be separate. Please forgive me if I have some of the facts wrong.

The grandmother of the three organizations is Inkshed. It was the brainchild of Russ Hunt and Jim Reither, who wanted more of a retreat than a standard conference–a place where Canadian writing teachers could reflect on their practices by hearing what others were doing and getting and giving input on those practices and theories through inkshedding as a reflective tool. However, so many people began to attend that having whole-group sessions became difficult. Inkshedding for such a large group was also less reflective, and more of an exercise in speed and agility of thought. Moreover, it became evident that two groups were not always happy with that format: researchers and writing-centre people.

The conferences of CASDW developed because the organizers realized that many writing researchers and teachers of writing needed a forum for their diverse curriculum interests and a format that included contiguous papers, keynote speakers, and streams for different areas of interest. Many writing teachers (myself included) began attending both Inkshed and CASDW, to satisfy the two different needs–reflection on practice, and presentation and discussion of research.

The Canadian Writing Centres Association (CWCA) was formed when some writing-centre administrators realised that there was no specific forum to address the needs of writing-centre administrators and tutors. However, it did not thrive in its first home as a Special Interest Group in the Society for the Study of Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) for several reasons. STLHE is really a forum for administrators. Hence, the conference fees were prohibitive for many, and the only payoff was time for an annual general meeting as a SIG. No papers–just a couple of hours for discussion. When CWCA broke away from STLHE in 2012, Brian Hotson thought that it was time to try for a conference of its own–one that would specifically address the needs of a writing-centre community, and that would not be prohibitively expensive. The results were phenomenal: we had over 100 participants for the first conference in 2013 and 85 for our second conference this year. We found that writing-centre people appreciated the one-day format, which kept costs to a minimum, and also having a forum where they could discuss both practical matters and action research within the Writing Centre community–and make connections within that group.

The second conference introduced SIGs, for specific interests within that community. One of those SIGs was concerned with the need for regional organizations that would be easier for some writing tutors (and student peers) to attend. Consequently, this year there will be a set of regional one-day conferences as well as the big 2015 conference in Ottawa, where CASDW and

Inkshed will also meet. Will these regional conferences take away from our attendance in Ottawa? That remains to be seen. The main point here is that there is a need being met by the CWCA Conference and that need is growing.

So, to summarize: we have Inkshed (which, in my opinion should remain as a reflective retreat for those who wish to discuss writing issues: reflections on research and writing program practice); CASDW (which is thriving as a true conference with papers on research, panel discussions, keynotes and workshops on all aspects of writing–curriculum, genre studies, technical writing, and some writing-centre practice); and CWCA (the home for practical discussions of writing-centre administration, practice, tutor training and networking).

I would think that none of us has the time or energy to go to all three in any one year. However, none of us has the same needs from year to year either. Some years, I need to have the reflection that Inkshed offers; some years, I need to present the research that I'm doing to an audience that can bring an expertise in genre studies, or action research, or technical writing to the table. Other years, I need to stay close to my Writing Centre roots, and just hang out with others who have the same needs as I do and have met those practical needs in interesting and creative ways.

To collapse these three different mandates into one, or to make each into a carbon copy of the others, would be to deny the richness of writing scholarship, the variety of writing practitioners, and the many-faceted ways that we approach writing in Canada today.

I hope this answers your question, or at least gives you a way of looking at the three organizations with the respect they all deserve.

Theresa.

Minutes of CASLL AGM, 29 May 2014

Minutes taken by Margaret Procter

Present: Clare Bermingham, Jordana Garbati, Kim Garwood, Heather Graves, Roger Graves, Deborah Knott, Judi Jewinski, Sarah King, Jennifer Lofgreen, Brock MacDonald, Margaret Procter, Jane Russwurm, Boba Samuels, Sheryl Stevenson, Deborah Tihanyi, Stephanie White, Vershawn Ashanti Young.

1. Agenda, with addition of report on Inkshed Publications under Other Business: moved, Deborah Knott, seconded Heather Graves. Approved.

2. Minutes from 2013 AGM: moved, Heather Graves, seconded Stephanie White. Approved.

3. New board members were acclaimed for a three-year term: Clare Bermingham (Waterloo), Kim Garwood (Guelph), Brock MacDonald (Toronto).

4. Treasurer's report, presented by Brock MacDonald. The current balance is $9742.26, about $2500 less than last year. Conference expenses and income from memberships had not yet been entered, but Brock noted that the CASLL balance was declining by about $2000 a year. One reason is that few people except attendees at conferences take out memberships: this year, for example, the total of 2014 paid-up members before the conference was only six. Discussion centred on ways to increase the number of paid memberships, and Brock moved (seconded by Roger Graves) that the board look for ways to integrate membership fees with conference registration. A friendly amendment from Stephanie White was accepted, asking the board also to consider and publicize the benefits of membership. Approved. The budget was accepted unanimously.

5. Brock also noted that the service provider for collecting CASLL and CASDW fees online intends to go out of business within a year, and that both organizations are working with the Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences to find a new service provider.

6. Plans for next year's Inkshed conference were presented and discussed. Roger Graves and Andrea Williams have volunteered to organize it in tandem with Congress at the University of Ottawa (with a local organizer still to be determined). Reflecting the success of a workshop session on publishing at the 2014 CASDW and a one-day Inkshed meeting in Montreal in 2010 that focused on research collaborations, a working session on quantitative research in writing studies is envisaged. Discussion ensued about whether the 2015 Inkshed should be part of CASDW or a freestanding session before or after it, and about whether it could be set up as an Institute, with proposals beforehand and priority given to CASLL members as participants. A suggestion was made for including creative writing as well as research writing. This was recognized as a potentially very popular attraction, which would require restrictions and caps on participation.

7. Roger Graves presented a report on Inkshed Publications. With the help of a $2500 grant from CASLL last year, production of two new books is planned for 2015, with another book to be reprinted in summer 2014. Both the new books bring funding with them: *Genre 2012*, edited by Artemeva and Freedman, will require only about $1000 from the Inkshed Publications budget; *Assignments Across the Disciplines*, edited by Roger Graves, will incur no cost to the budget. *Two Sides to a Story* by McLeod-Rogers will be reprinted and also upgraded in quality as an online PDF at very little cost. With a current balance of $4850, Inkshed Publications is seeking more publication projects. A call for proposals was circulated.

8. The report also noted questions about the status of Inkshed Publications as a business entity. The US Internal Revenue Service now expects reporting of US income from editors whose names are on file with the former Trafford Publishing, now part of a US publishing company. It would be possible to move the printing for Inkshed Publications to another

Canadian company to avoid that problem. Inkshed Publications could also consider becoming a non-profit corporation or a non-profit society, to be registered either nationally or provincially.

9. A general motion of thanks was made to Judi Jewinski and Kim Garwood for organizing a successful and stimulating Inkshed 30 conference.

10. Deborah Knott moved to adjourn, seconded by Sarah King. Approved.