

Inkshed Online Newsletter, May 2015

Inkshedding is back again!

This issue comes out just before the Inkshed 31 conference (Ottawa, May 28), which promises to “give a new twist to the practice of inkshedding” — not only by having participants come and write in a workshop format, but also by using an online platform for the proposal stage and probably beyond.

That’s also how Doug Brent’s provocatively-titled article starts: his conversion to using inkshedding as a key part of his courses, facilitated by the digital environment in which he teaches and his students live. He knows the pitfalls, and cites remarks on the pros and cons from a team at University of Alberta that has been using similar methods. But, as he explains elegantly and concisely, he sees the electronic inkshed as creating a new dynamic in the social process of writing, and he is ready to join others in experimenting with it further.

Nancy Bray (page 9) contributes a review of a recent and distinctive Canadian writing textbook, based on classroom practices used at the University of Toronto Mississauga. Some of those will remind you of inkshedding, and are also demonstrably adaptable to changing teaching environments.

Inkshedding Goes Viral: Variations on Shared Writing in a Digital Environment

by Doug Brent, University of Calgary

Inkshedding will not be news to readers of this newsletter (although if it is, please see Russ Hunt’s highly useful overview. “What Is Inkshedding?”) However, at a recent writing conference in the US, I designed a talk around the origins of the practice and ways of using it in digital environments. This caused me to do some new thinking about inkshedding and to look at ways it is being used by others at other institutions. I found the ensuing discussion revealing, and it is largely this discussion, and the new ways that I have been using Inkshedding personally, that I want to share with you now.

First, the personal story. To be frank, I have tried inkshedding off and on in my own teaching and have never been a big fan. It’s not that I don’t believe in its premises: that writing is fundamentally social, and that traditional freewriting in the Peter Elbow mode, while useful in encouraging fluency and learning how to suspend the internal editor for a while, is at odds with

this social aspect of writing. Elbow-style freewriting is liberating because the freewrites are seldom if ever read by others, but at the same time, writing that isn't *to* somebody about something just isn't quite writing. Elbow himself, having been introduced to inkshedding at the Inkshed 18 conference, is aware of this distinction:

For some people freewriting feels like a waste of time. They can't see any reason to give enough attention and caring to this useless activity—and so no doors open. In effect, the stakes are *too* low. But inkshedding raises the stakes just a bit because the writing is always doing academic work and it always goes to at least a few readers.

I believe those premises. The reason inkshedding has tended not to catch on in my classes is that, frankly, it is just too damned cumbersome. Handwriting, especially handwriting that is clear enough for other people to be able to read it, is slow. Equally slow is the practice of passing the inksheds around and marking particularly interesting passages. And, since the point of inkshedding is that it should be seen by more than two or three people, somebody needs to collect them, transcribe the marked-up passages, and circulate them later.

This year, for the first time, I have been teaching in a computer lab classroom and using Google Docs as the only writing platform for both informal and formal composing, revising and sharing. I decided to see what inkshedding could do in this environment, and was immediately captivated by its potential. After a bit of experimentation, I found that I could even streamline the transcription aspect of inkshedding by creating an empty shared document and asking students to read each other's inksheds and copy interesting passages into it. A collaboratively constructed document begins to unfold in real time.

I don't pretend that I'm the first person who has thought of using collaborative software to share inksheds. The team behind the award-winning Writing Studies 101 program at the University of Alberta does it all the time. But my somewhat belated discovery of how the affordances of the digital environment intersect with the principles of inkshedding has led me to play with the medium somewhat and see what more it can do.

The next phase came more or less by accident. I am using the Writing About Writing approach championed by people like Downs and Wardle, and I try to get students doing some novice-level empirical research on writing to help them internalize what it means to be part of an actual knowledge-making community, not just a knowledge-recycling community. One exercise I give them is to interview each other on matters relevant to the current reading, and then use that as the basis of a short paper that seeks to extend, say, Mike Rose's 1980 observations on writer's block by seeing whether students show similar patterns in 2015.

One morning when the agenda called for students to begin their interviews, the city was recovering from a snowstorm and transit was still snarled. At the beginning of the class about six students were present. I knew that the rest of the students would be stuck for data and

would get behind the others in completing the exercise. I considered just dropping the exercise, but I decided instead to adapt it by asking students to inkshed about their own writing strategies in the light of Rose's observations. In fact, most of the students eventually showed up, and those who didn't could complete the exercise from home. Now instead of one or two interviews, the students had twenty collections of data in the form of each other's inksheds. The inksheds became a research corpus that students could read through looking for themes and patterns, and citing specific examples to support the claims they wanted to make about those themes. They were doing work as close to the sort of work performed by professionals in Writing Studies as it was possible to make it, given the artificial environment of the classroom. In the language of Lave and Wenger, they become legitimate peripheral participants in the community of practice that is Writing Studies.

Student writers, of course, will usually do what you tell them to, or at least try to approximate what you tell them to do, because of the obvious power gradient in any course. To see what the real uptake of inkshedding was among the students, I conducted a brief anonymous survey using SurveyMonkey. I received fourteen responses from a class of twenty students, a response rate that suggests engagement all by itself. The responses were almost entirely positive:

- Inkshedding 'forces' us to provide our thoughts and ideas, in a way that pretty much 100% engages us.
- I think it is more beneficial, because I personally do not like speaking aloud. This gives me and other students like me a chance to get their point across without feeling pressured.
- It is more useful because we get a chance to see our peers responses on paper and we can later reference them for research papers.

On the specific merits of using Google Drive as a medium for inkshedding and peer reviewing, responses were equally positive:

- I like Google Drive because of how instant everything is. Collaborating and commenting are the most useful parts, I think. Instead of having to send a file or give a physical copy of a paper to a classmate or professor for review, you can just share it on Drive and see the comments as they are being created. This also makes it easier to make changes to your own paper based on the comments, since you can just copy the file in Drive and have the original file open in another tab to look at, instead of having to constantly reference a piece of paper.
- Google drive was definitely a great tool to use in this class because we do so much peer review, editing, and adding on to our work that without google drive our stuff would probably be more unorganized and less easy to access. It also gives us the ability to look over the assignments again whenever we want to.

- Google Drive made it easier to communicate and more efficient. If everyone wrote on a piece of paper and passed it around chances are only one or two people would see it, but with Drive it is available for everyone to view, which is amazing!

Of course, not everyone was equally comfortable with being always on, all the time, and at least one longed for the privacy and control over one's own text that hard copy affords:

- I hated using google drive. I don't like having my work available to everyone especially before it is ready. I would rather submit my paper on blackboard or email privately with a couple students of my choice for peer reviews.

And on the subject of inksheds in particular, not every student saw the utility of sharing informal texts:

- Saw it as a waste of time as we already know our personal strengths when it comes to writing. Unless of course the professor is using it as a way to judge his student's abilities, I would not ink shed at all

Well, you can't win them all, but that last comment should help me remember that it is important to explain, repeatedly and in various ways, the social view of language that underpins inkshedding, a view that students may not already share.

In preparation for the above-mentioned talk in which I shared the lore of inkshedding with my U.S. colleagues, I decided to do some of my own informal research to see how widespread the practice still is. I started by asking users of the CASLL and CASDW listservs to share how they were using Inkshedding in their own pedagogical practice. I was particularly interested in whether they used some form of real-time collaborative software to facilitate the practice, and what effect they thought it had. I received a number of interesting replies, many of which readers of *Inkshed* may already have seen on the listserv. With the permission of the collective authors, I'd like to share one particularly interesting response in full because it represents the collective thoughts of the entire University of Alberta's Writing Studies team (Jon Gordon, Anna Chilewska, Christina Grant, Lisa Ann Robertson, Rachel Prusko, Greg Bechtel, and Leilei Chen).

Pros:

- as a writing-to-learn tool;
- as an exploration tool;
- as a way to understand text(s), assignment(s), difficult concept(s), etc.;
- as a safe place where students can ask questions and express confusion;
- as a place of sharing experience and knowledge;
- as a tool that triggers further thinking about topics, texts, assignments;
- as a reflection tool (after an assignment or a task has been completed);

- as a crossroad (making connections between what is in class and what is outside of class or how knowledge gained in class can be applied elsewhere);
- as a meditation tool (on a difficult day, to get students to centre themselves);
- To build relationships: I tell my students that I will have a conversation in the margins with them over the semester. This also happens between the students themselves, but as an instructor what I love best about inksheds is the way it allows me to reach students;
- To provide a method of writing that everyone can succeed with; inkshedding is diplomatic and the fact that it isn't about punctuation, grammar and structure means that it opens up spaces of possibility for students who have been previously silenced by anxieties about those things;
- To bring the voices of quiet students onto the floor; e.g., I pull an insightful quote from a quiet student's inkshed and just before class, ask them if I can call on them to share their excellent point with the class;
- To get students can take risks (e.g., test something a little edgier, or feel safe about saying that they dislike or disagree with someone/something);
- To help students find paper topics;
- It allows students to read each other's writing, which not only exposes them to different interpretations and understandings of the readings, but also allows them to see the range of student writing out there. They get to see "real" student writing. This has a variety of benefits, addressed below;
- Writing for a real audience allows them to develop a sense of audience—they replicate the strategies they find worked for their readers and want to achieve greater clarity for their readers. Their peer readers are often more important than their instructor reader;
- They get stylistic and organizational ideas from each other. Frequently a student will report that she liked the way so-and-so did this or wrote in a particular way, and they experiment with it the next time around;
- Reading each other's writing, especially this informal writing, is immensely reassuring in letting them know they are not the only one who thinks a certain way or struggles with an issue (writing or a difficult article);
- Conversely, reading each other's writing exposes them to a variety of experiences and ideas that may be different from their own. Seeing their peers twice a week and having to comment on their writing brings about a certain cultural sensitivity that may not develop otherwise;
- The pointing and the inkshed reporting, which calls attention to positive aspects of inksheds builds students' confidence because they are not used to having readers point out what they like or say that their words are eloquent, humorous, powerful, etc. That little smile on a student's face when someone calls attention to something they wrote is great to see;

- Often their understanding of a concept is enhanced or increased by reading someone else's summary or interpretation of it.

Cons:

- International students sometimes don't see inksheds as helping them improve their Standard Written English;
- Students need a certain level of language proficiency before they can inkshed in English;
- Students can get the false impression that grammar doesn't matter in their writing—or some lesser order errors can get fossilized— if this is the only or main genre of writing in a class. This can be ameliorated in various ways; i.e. dialogue, 'soft' expectations for gradual improvement, etc.
- If not carefully coached on how to give worthwhile content feedback, students can get lazy in doing so OR actually hurt each other. Feedback needs to be monitored—at least early on.
- Inkshedding can be stressful, especially the first one or two. Instructors can reduce stress on the first few inksheds by making them about easy topics rather than about a particular reading.
- Students can reject or de-value inkshedding (especially early on) if they don't understand why we are asking them to it. Instructors can spend time on rationale (and engage their ideas too) to help with this. Also, writing along with students models its value for all—and also messy writing!

That is quite an impressive list, and it's gratifying that the cons are so vastly outweighed by the pros. I would like to add just a few caveats of my own to the list of possible cons.

First, it's really important to distinguish the sorts of comments appropriate to an inkshed from the sorts appropriate to a peer review of a draft. In the former case, various noises of appreciation, comments that use the inkshed for further speculation, even significant digressions, are entirely appropriate because the goal is to continue the conversation and show the writers that they are being read. Inksheds are never revised, just built on top of. In the case of peer review, however, the goal is to help a writer see ways in which a draft can be improved or moved forward. Noises of appreciation are bolstering but of little practical use here. More appropriate are comments that stay as close as possible to the actual text, showing where a reader may want more information, be confused, or stumble over an awkward or ambiguous construction. If students confuse the two very different jobs, their contributions to the collective discourse won't be as useful.

Second, my own extended use of inkshedding comes perilously close to raising the stakes a little bit more. It's hard to do a regular inkshed "wrong" exactly (although [Miriam Horne's ethnographic study of the CASLL community](#) suggests that there are some unwritten rules that one must take on board in order to feel fully comfortable with the practice). But once I

introduced the practice of using inksheds as research data, I also introduced a further slight raising of the stakes. Inksheds are still not revised, not edited or judged for correctness. But an inkshed that is too far off message, that doesn't really follow the prompt, will likely not provide very useful data for other students to use.

I feel that these possible tradeoffs are well worth the risk. In exchange for the benefits of building a community of shared experience, I'm willing to expend the energy it takes to make sure that students keep inkshedding separate from peer review and attend to the prompt enough to stay engaged with the larger task.

I'd like to respectfully disagree with one observation made by the WRS 101 team, however. Jon Gordon, who collected the responses from the team and conveyed them to me, prefaced his message by saying,

Given our recent move to all electronic submission of assignments, inksheds are submitted through Moodle forums, where other students can read and reply to them. I don't think the move to an electronic environment has fundamentally altered the process though.

Perhaps it hasn't altered the process at U of A – presumably they had already worked out ways of incorporating more traditional hard-copy inkshedding into their teaching. For me, it has. At the most basic level, it has made the process easy enough that I am motivated to continue using it. But more fundamentally, I would argue that traditional inkshedding must work constantly uphill against the natural affordances and constraints of print.

Print and print-like forms such as handwritten hard copy tend to be individualistic forms. When you ask students to write, heads go down and everyone disappears into a private bubble. Publication is generally a formal thing, an act in which one's words make it past circles of gatekeepers until they finally see the light of day in formal mass-produced volumes. The romantic notion of the solitary genius, argued against by the first wave of social constructivist scholars of the eighties such as Bruffee, Lunsford and Ede, and LeFevre, has much of its genesis in the peculiar properties of writing and particularly of print. By centralizing the production of copies, print makes copyright possible.

Electronic text, on the contrary, tends to collapse the processes of writing and publication into a relatively seamless blur. As internet gurus from [John Perry Barlow](#) on never tire of pointing out, the affordances and constraints of electronic text are the reverse of those of print. Electronic text encourages casual sharing, and any attempt to assert centralized control in the name of intellectual property is inherently difficult because it is working uphill against the natural tendencies of the medium.

That's why, for me, electronic inkshedding is fundamentally different from hard-copy inkshedding. It isn't just faster than hard-copy inkshedding; the speed with which electronic

inksheds can be created, shared and worked upon by an entire class at once constitutes what McLuhan, quoting Kenneth Boulding, calls a “break boundary at which the system suddenly changes into another or passes some point of no return in its dynamic processes” (*Understanding Media* 38). The electronic inkshed joins the blog, the tweet, the facebook posting, the Pirate Bay file, in a process of immediate sharing that is part of the environment in which our students have grown up.

I am far from finished experimenting with the new affordances of electronic inkshedding, and I hope that the *Inkshed Newsletter*, itself recently morphed from a print newsletter into a blog, will continue to be a forum in which we can share new changes on Jim and Russ’s humble little invention. Let’s see what it can do once past the break boundary between hard copy and electronic text.

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Eight Steps to Better Writing: A Review of Koerber and Allen's *Clear, Precise, Direct*

by [Nancy Bray](#), University of Alberta

Duncan Koerber and Guy Allen. *Clear, Precise, Direct: Strategies for Writing*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Duncan Koerber and Guy Allen's textbook *Clear, Precise, Direct* presents a straightforward program designed to improve the prose of beginning post-secondary writers. Novice writers, Koerber and Allen claim, can improve their prose in two to three months by following the eight lessons in the book, lessons which describe writing strategies such as developing a strong writing process, using words economically, finding strong verbs and nouns, applying the active voice, and using original language, parallelism, and varied sentence structure. Based on the authors' many years of classroom experience, the textbook uses explanations, exercises, examples, and assignments to help students to identify interfering factors that detract from their writing and to practice enhancing factors that will improve it.

One unique feature of this textbook is its mix of examples from various types of writing. Koerber and Allen draw from professional writing, journalism, creative writing, and academic writing to make their case that clear, precise and direct writing is appreciated in many genres. For instance, the authors use Madam Justice Denise E. Bellamy's report on the Toronto City Council's computer leasing scandal—a surprisingly engaging read—to illustrate that bureaucratic writing can be compelling if wordiness is eliminated. This diversity of examples does not, however, render the textbook too broad for use in an academic writing classroom. Each chapter contains a section devoted to using the eight key strategies in academic writing, and the textbook often takes a hard stance against some of the commonly identified problems with our scholarly writing. "There is no excuse for wordiness in academia," the authors write (p. 48), and the accompanying exercises in this section ask students to find examples of badly written academic texts and identify how they are ineffective (p. 37). While advanced university students might benefit from more nuanced discussions on academic writing (for instance, discussions on expert language and discourse community norms), pushing beginning academic writers to write clearly will likely eliminate excesses that we often see in student writing such as empty verbiage and commonplace generalizations.

Echoing the work of Peter Elbow, Koerber and Allen believe that assignments emphasizing personal narrative provide students with the opportunity to focus on writing, rather than on unfamiliar content. They contend that students who practice their key strategies while writing personal narrative will have an easier transition to the rigours of academic writing (p. 2). However, the authors do seem to recognize that some instructors and institutions may feel

uncomfortable with a textbook that does not give students significant practice with academic writing. Each chapter in the textbook therefore ends with two peer models: one using personal narrative and one using a more traditional academic writing style, and the assignments at the end of the chapter are also similarly structured. Students are given the choice between writing on a personal topic or writing a research paper on particular topics, topics which have been deliberately chosen to encourage students to put into practice the key writing strategies explained in each chapter.

Instructors will find ample material in the textbook around which to build a course: there are several shorter exercises included at key points throughout each chapter that could be completed in class, and class discussions could be based on the rhetorical analysis questions that follow all of the peer models. The eight-chapter structure of the book may make it too short for the typical thirteen-week semester. As a result, instructors may want to incorporate additional material on revision, a topic which is only mentioned briefly by Koerber and Allen and which is a well-known problem area for many students. Donald Murray's *The Craft of Revision*, with its similar friendly tone and approach, could be a strong companion textbook for a course based on *Clear, Precise, Direct*.

The personable tone and crisp explanations make this a good fit for first- and second-year introductory writing courses. In addition, advanced English as a Subsequent Language learners will appreciate the textbook's clear language. Thanks to its well-structured material and clearly defined pedagogical goals, *Clear, Precise, Direct* is a strong textbook that will undoubtedly help many students to improve their writing.