

Inkshed

Newsletter of the Canadian Association for the Study of Writing and Reading
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Inside Inkshed

Garth Boomer	Some Thoughts on Inkshed 1987	1
Inksheddors at CCCC and ACUTE:		
Jacqueline Howse and Katherine McManus,	The Dilemma of Evaluation in the Writing Centre	3
Kenna Manos,	Preliminary Remarks	5
Deborah Schnitzer	Work in Process	7
Chris Bullock	Review: <u>Notebooks of the Mind</u>	8
Kay Stewart	Editorial Inkshedding	11
Chris Bullock	An Invitation	11
	<u>Inkshed</u> Subscription Form	12

"The search for going beneath the appearance of things . . . is shared by those who unconsciously yet purposefully prepare for a life of the mind, whether in the sciences or in the arts. But at the beginning, all that the young reader seems to be aware of is a great love of the uncommon and of a devouring need for the written word. During childhood and adolescence, most young people read with little discrimination; it is the intoxication of an imagined world which pulls them back, again and again, into the abundance of books."

Vera John-Steiner, Notebooks of the Mind (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 126.

Inkshed

6.4 September 1987

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A primary objective of this newsletter is to explore relationships among research, theory, and practice in language acquisition and language use. Inkshed publishes informative pieces such as notices, reports and reviews of articles, journals, books, textbooks, conferences, and workshops; it also publishes polemical discussions of events, issues, problems, and questions of concern to teachers in Canada interested in writing and reading theory and practice.

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SOME THOUGHTS ON INKSHED 1987

/// Garth Boomer

Dear Inkshedders,

The writing that follows was written in the Inkshed journal at the first Inkshed session at Winnipeg. I gave it to Kay for possible inclusion in the newsletter not because I think it is an especially good piece of writing, but because I wanted to share with you proof that the process of the conference works even with Australians. I was quickly provoked and stimulated to start thinking in new ways about some of my old problems.

I also wanted to let you know that we Australians are learning more each day about the relationship between writing and thinking. I agree with those who on the last day said that Inkshed must continue to believe in and to practice the art of shedding ink.

My mind races ahead to the time when to talkshed and inkshed you add mimeshed, mediashed, artshed and computershed. Why not bring talentshed into the mainsteam of the proceedings, too?

To all of you I send greetings and thanks for allowing me to be a serendipitous inkshedder. I will continue the conversation in Australia and hope to be with you again before long.

Sincerely,

Garth Boomer

The question of models of instruction requires a prior question about the nature and processes of deliberate learning.

We might begin by assuming that accidental or incidental learning is occurring all the time, especially in those areas where the learner is currently anxious or in a state of disequilibrium. The teacher can take account of such learning only in "climate setting, "opportunity giving" ways.

When it comes to deliberate learning we can talk about deliberate teaching, which goes/can go hand in hand with such learning.

If one deliberately wants to teach something one can do this without much reference to the learner's intention, perhaps applying pressure with various sanctions or various rewards for attention (e.g. Dale Carnegie type praise, good marks, etc.). The trouble with this kind of teaching is that it is likely to get the students deliberately learning how to cope with the teacher's deliberate teaching rather than with what the teacher is trying to get them to learn. The learners' learning is therefore precarious and falsely directed.

Another way to look at this is to withhold deliberate teaching in order first to establish disequilibrium in the learners with respect to the learning area/matter which the teacher wishes to be part of the learning, exploration and outcome. This disequilibrium could perhaps better be called curiosity or desire to know or to be able to do.

Once this is established, the teacher's deliberate teaching can be deliberately appropriated by the learners in their quest. They can, if allowed, commission direct knowledge/information from the teacher with respect to their plans and prospects.

Even as I write this, I realize its inadequacy. The teacher will have designs and the pupils will have aspirations which are not explicit and these forces will operate subliminally or unconsciously but nonetheless powerfully as well as the explicit intentions.

It is most likely that because of the teacher's positional power (status) and experiential power (more subtle world view--greater knowledge/life base) that, while a superficially non-coercive approach might be adopted, a strong suasive influence will operate from teacher to students, especially if the student is working in a trusting collaborative mode on a negotiated project with the teacher. Inkshed itself, being a trusting community, is therefore interesting as a subject for investigation. Such a relationship will facilitate the operation of various conversion-like forces at the tacit level.

The teacher, knowing this and wishing to diminish such subliminal power, would need to adopt a deliberate strategy of alienating the student from his/her own performance as teacher as an insurance against insidious colonization. This can only be managed if the teacher continuously breaks the spell of his or her own auto-erotic effect on the self (the suasion of his/her own teaching on his/her own self). We teach others by teaching ourselves anew. We need to intervene in/ interrupt our own lovingly coercive self-hypnosis. We need to make it difficult to convince ourselves of the integrity of our performance by catching ourselves out in various kinds of contamination and previously unexamined abandonment to cliches, categories, conventions, discourses, opinions and interpretations. In this way, we would enact for our students the kind of subversive self-reflection or even the painful "scar-ification"* which is, I think, at the heart of all powerful learning.

*Thanks to Deanne Bogdan

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INKSHEDDERS AT CCCC AND ACUTE

The first of the following pieces is an excerpt from a paper presented at a panel session entitled "The Politics of Evaluation in Some Canadian Contexts," a panel chaired by Phyllis Artiss of Memorial University and sponsored by the Canadian Caucus at CCCC, Atlanta, March 20, 1987; the second is the introduction to a special working session on composition at ACUTE organized by Kenna Manos and Susan Drain, May 1987.

THE DILEMMA OF EVALUATION IN THE WRITING CENTRE

A Reading for Two Voices /// Jacqueline Howse/Katherine McManus

In presenting this paper, Katherine assumes the voice of an English teacher who is considering whether or not to send her students to the Writing Centre. Jacqueline's 'voice' responds as the Writing Centre tutor who is explaining the process of composition as it occurs in the Writing Centre to an English Department session on pedagogy. The excerpt is taken from the discussion of revision.

TEACHER: As I give more and more assignments during class time, in defence against plagiarism, I am hearing a louder and louder cry in favour of revision. I have asked students to revise graded papers but all they do is stick my suggested words into their sentences, resulting in a real potpourri of style and meaning. I used to send students to the Writing Centre for help with revision and what came back were wonderfully changed papers, but ones whose authorship I had to question.

The students who are good writers, are good writers. This new emphasis on revision is just confusing the line between the truly good and deserving students and the ones who are only good if you give them several chances. All of the good students I have ever had were able to write well out-of-class or in-class. Good students don't need time to revise. And they deserve A's because they write perfect papers whenever they write. I will never give an A to a student who has spelling or punctuation errors in an essay. If the student is good, the paper will be written correctly the first time.

Furthermore, allowing students to revise everything will leave them unprepared to compete on the final examination. The students must practice writing in timed situations so they are able to organize their thoughts quickly and put their information into the essay, in the correct order, in one attempt. I think allowing students to revise and re-draft papers during the semester will weaken their performance on the exam.

Expecting students to write essays well, and write tests well, is the only way we have to preserve a standard of excellence. We cannot let the standard be eroded by allowing everybody several chances to get a thing right!

TUTOR: Revision is perhaps the most important activity in the tutoring process, because it is at this point that a writer can see the effect on his audience. The tutor constantly emphasizes that the writer's knowledge is worth communicating and suggests areas where the paper could be clearer. The tutor must maintain an encouraging positive tone, and must be able to recognize in herself the tendency to want to criticize or correct, and scrupulously avoid doing so.

In this way, revision can be a part of the process in which real learning takes place. Eric Branscomb describes the revising process in his article "Types of Conferences and the Composing Process" (The Writing Center Journal 1 [1986]: 27-35):

Since in revising the writer is moving to a successively greater emphasis on audience needs and less on egocentric needs . . . the instructor must increasingly invoke the image of the reader, either personally ("I don't understand this"), or more abstractly ("Would another person understand this?").

The writer may revise the content of her paper in subsequent drafts, as well as improve the organization and surface elements. Having gotten her thoughts down on paper at one stage of their development, her mind is freed from the distraction of getting them out in the first place, and she can pursue them to another level.

A paper's potential development is limited only by the constraints of time, and revision can continue until the due date for the paper approaches. Having been through the process from discovering a topic and organizing material for a particular audience, drafting the paper, experiencing a reader's response and revising . . . and revising, the student writer knows what the finished product should look like and how to produce it. With his new-found confidence that there is a process that can be learned, the student writer can practice until he is comfortable with the process, and then condense it when he is writing an exam.

. . .

In the concluding commentary, the co-authors point out the dangers to students of "being tugged one way or the other," and the real advantages of establishing a useful dialogue between the Writing Centre tutors and the members of the English department.

They recommend that Writing Centres maintain a high profile, encouraging English teachers to visit the Centre, or even phone, to check on their students' progress. In this way, teachers can discover how tutors work without being lectured to. The Centre can have "open house" sessions, when interested teachers can come by to ask questions or just chat.

The paper concludes: "By being highly visible on campus and letting both students and faculty from all writing-oriented disciplines know how we work, Writing Centres can correct some of the misconceptions about our operation, and become a more active force in jointing with teachers to help students improve their writing."

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

/// Kenna Manos

Courses devoted exclusively to composition, as well as attention to composition in literature courses, have increased dramatically in Canadian universities over the past ten years. Those of us concerned with the place of writing and composition courses in English departments, however, do not talk about it at ACUTE--at least not in the formal sessions. Rather, the forums available to us are the Inkshed Conference, started by Russell Hunt and Jim Reither in Fredericton, the Canadian Council of Teachers of English (whose domain includes elementary and high-school teaching), or the huge annual American Conference on College Composition. It seems to me curious that there is no formal discussion at ACUTE, our national forum as university teachers of English, of what some of us do most of the time and most of us do at least some of the time. Composition has been invisible in all but one of the annual meetings I have attended since 1976. The absence of discussion is the more curious in view of the large number of ACUTE members choosing composition as a field of interest, as listed in the current ACUTE Directory. Although presuming anything significant from a simple head count is obviously perilous, I want to observe nevertheless that those who selected composition as a field of interest is greater than those who selected some twenty other fields, among which are, for example, Commonwealth Literature, Restoration Literature, American Fiction, Literary History, Modern British Poetry, and Canadian Studies.

It would seem to me that no one is better suited to address the central questions raised by research in composition than ACUTE members are. At the same time, teaching composition is (or at

least can be) something more, and extraordinarily more exciting, than dreary marking and tedious attention to mechanical matters. But this superficial notion of composition is, I suspect, one of the traditional pieties which prompts literature teachers to protect their domain against what is seen as the unwelcome incursion of "remedial" language teaching. (A useful corrective to this view might be found in the early inclusion, in the States at any rate, of both literary studies and composition under the parent discipline of "English Rhetoric and Language.")

For ACUTE to provide a forum for ongoing discussion of the place of composition in the English department seems to me important for several reasons, among which are these. First, matters now being explored in composition research strongly overlap the current concerns in literary studies. . . . Second, composition courses, although sometimes viewed as trendy responses to misguided public appeals for university accountability, do not seem likely to disappear. The most informed predictions I've seen suggest that composition courses will continue to increase, and continue to be housed--however uneasily--in English departments. Third, the evident reluctance of tenured and senior faculty to become involved in composition sends a clear message to our students that work on their writing is a lowly prerequisite to becoming involved in the real stuff of literature. This message is reinforced by the number of part-timers and graduate students assigned to teach composition and the reported disinclination of tenure committees to consider composition research as "real" scholarship. Fourth, I am afraid that unless the subtlety, rigorous analysis and theoretical vigour which characterize literary studies are brought to bear more directly on the composition work being done in Canadian universities, then the back-to-basics contingent might succeed in restricting the field of composition to nothing more than mechanical error counts. Tests of grammar are already put forth all too often as reasonable ways of testing effective writing. Who is more fitted to undermine such a simplistic notion of writing than the members of ACUTE?

That reading (interpreting) and writing are centrally connected seems so obvious to me that I'm at a loss to understand the need at this point for underlining the connection. I would hope that attention to composition at ACUTE meetings might help to bridge what seems to me an increasingly pernicious gap between reading and writing, literary studies and composition.

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WORK IN PROCESS

/// Deborah Schnitzer

While working through a twentieth century literature course at the University of Manitoba two years ago, tackling a major rhythm of descent in Margaret Atwood's Surfacing, I noticed (with some measure of alarm) students valiantly treading water at the baptismal font shaped by my relentless reliance upon the lecture method. I realized that the holding pattern, while affirming their endurance, said some devastatingly bad things about the pedagogy I was putting into play. We were never going to penetrate the surface of this novel, let alone excavate its lake bottom.

By chance (not an accurate reflection of my ulterior motive at all) I consulted with Coralie Bryant and through her made contact with the collaborative and journal techniques that she, researcher Patrick Dias and classroom teacher Rudi Engbrecht were advocating to foster more vigorous student-centered experiences. I adapted the journal method they had been developing to meet the peculiar circumstances of our twice-weekly encounters and discovered that my students entered the text and debated its technique. We worked with small and large group conferencing and built journal responses that monitored private and collaborative reactions to key passages in the novel.

The experience with Surfacing facilitated through these strategies allowed the classroom to become a community. Students who had never read a novel proclaimed that they'd actually "seen one through." Others, who had been intimidated by the size of the class and their own caution, began to take risks in small group discussion and to transfer that confidence to their own journal responses. My students were writing during every class--absorbing the linguistic universe of the novel, discovering inconsistencies in the first person point of view, isolating provocative image patterns and assessing the significance of the narrator's shifting descriptive modes.

When we'd completed the evaluation of the journal process together, my sense of the depth and the enjoyment we'd achieved was confirmed by the enthusiasm their remarks expressed. I was beginning to learn how to step back in critical ways, to facilitate rather than to explicate and to allow a learning process to take shape that my earlier methods had prohibited.

During the time that has followed this Surfacing experience, I've worked more effectively, I think, with process techniques. I rely on collaborative strategies as a matter of course and work with a variety of improvisational text-building routines during class time to ensure that my students can respond to the fiction in written form long before they commit themselves to a formal paper. The implementation of peer-editing workshopping further

encourages my students to realize and exercise their own editorial power. We may even successfully bypass my tendency to comment profusely on their papers without encouraging their editorship before the paper is submitted and their tendency to ignore the red-inked commentary--those sometimes euphemistic hatchings that are often perceived by students as only incidental to their final grade.

For my part, it becomes increasingly apparent that work in process generates the kinds of creative teaching alternatives that will liberate more dynamic and relevant standards of measure.

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REVIEW

/// Chris Bullock

Vera John-Steiner. Notebooks of the Mind: Explorations of Thinking. Albuquerque: U. of New Mexico P, 1985 (cloth); New York: Harper and Row, 1987 (paper).

Vera John-Steiner is a psycholinguist at the University of New Mexico who has used the ideas of Lev Vygotsky and Paolo Freire in ways that ought to be relevant to all teachers of composition. One of the mainstays of my collection of composition articles is "An Interactionist Approach to Advancing Literacy," a Harvard Educational Review article (August 1977) in which John-Steiner and her co-author, Nan Elsasser, suggest how writing teachers can, in a seeming paradox, use material from students' social contexts to make possible the decontextualization process necessary for effective writing.

My interest in John-Steiner's work and Donald Murray's enthusiastic review in the May 1987 issue of College Composition and Communication made me eager to read Notebooks of the Mind. However, I came away from the book with the sense that though John-Steiner has expanded her horizons in a way that is potentially very interesting for composition teachers, there are important reasons why Notebooks is unlikely to become, as Murray claims, "a seminal book in our discipline"(216).

"Sources of Thought," Part One of Notebooks, is devoted to the origins and early development of creative thinking in the "artists, scientists, philosophers and historians"(1987. 2) John-Steiner is studying. Part Two, "The Languages of the Mind," looks at the internal and external workings of creative thought in the realms of visual art, writing, music, dance and science. Each Part contains extensive quotations from interviews Steiner herself conducted, as well as from "letters, journals, autobiographies, [and] works in progress. . ." (2).

Though John-Steiner's original focus was the "rapid moments of insight and discovery" (7-8) associated with creativity, her subject eventually became, she tells us, the "sustained and productive" (8) aspect of creative thinking. In the conclusion to her book she identifies three main themes or questions: what characterizes the growth of creative thinking? do the different languages of the mind have anything in common? is there any essential difference between creative and everyday thinking? (205-6)

The answers to the first and third questions appear to be the same: in its developing and developed states, creative thinking is characterized by a "continuity of concern" (220). Creative thinkers usually gain a particular focus early in life, and they remain continuously preoccupied with the subject of their creative thinking. This self-renewing intensity seems to be the only feature they share.

In his review, Donald Murray claims that his allowing his students to become obsessed with a particular subject creates the conditions for above average writing, conditions not found in the bland cafeteria approach to subjects found in the average school system (215). The point is well taken, except that obsession by itself hardly guarantees creativity. It is true that John-Steiner herself focusses intensely on "intensity" as the "one universal given" (220) of creative thinking. But some of the other features of creative people that she notes almost in passing--their ability to tolerate contradictions (60), their openness to the whole range of their feelings and reactions (67), their gifts of observation (174)--surely work to neutralize the potentially negative aspects of obsession. English Departments are full of narrow and obsessive specializations; I don't think I, Murray or John-Steiner would describe them as bastions of creativity

The second question John-Steiner raises, the question of the relation of the different "languages of the mind," represents most clearly the expansion of her interests. In previous articles, her interest in Vygotsky led her to see thought as arising from inner speech, the internalization of the external dialogue the child conducts with its caretakers. In Chapter One of Notebooks, "The Beginnings," John-Steiner now stresses the fact that the process by which outer speech becomes inner speech also occurs with movement and visual images, and that these modes possess an immediacy lacking in language because of its distancing and stabilizing nature (29). Her book develops the idea that different disciplines reflect differing orderings of priority among movement, visual images and language, and that disciplines emphasizing movement and visual thinking have their versions of inner speech too; that there is, in John-Steiner's rather unappetising words, "condensed thought across several modalities" (215).

John-Steiner's point concerning the "languages of the mind" I find an important and rather neglected emphasis in our field. As a writing teacher, I encounter many students whose modes of thinking are complex and valuable and yet much less language-centred than mine is. As a writer interested in truth to personal experience, I find a constant tension between the stabilising linguistic representations I use and the difficult, changing and contradictory material I am trying to convey. As someone interested in history, I am fully aware that the replacement of movement thinking by verbal thinking that accompanies the decline of tribal societies is the source of profound losses as well as gains. For all these reasons, this emphasis in Notebooks of the Mind speaks to me.

Yet the pluralism implied in this valuable idea of "languages of the mind" results in a significant weakness in the book. A subject as general as "creative thinking" lends itself to a succession of accounts of how particular creative thinkers have developed, gone about their business, or plan to go about their future business. And if all these thinkers have in common is "intensity," and if their thinking reflects quite differing priorities among the "languages of the mind," then these accounts will likely be quite diverse. Thus the fact that Notebooks is a collection of diverse accounts that add very little to each other proves John-Steiner's points, but also gives the book a rather disconcerting lack of unity and development. It is interesting, in this light, that the clearest statement of the book's main concerns comes in its concluding chapter; it's as if John-Steiner had, at the end of her study, taken a deep breath and said "Now, what does all this really prove?"

Notebooks is then, to my mind, quite unusable in a writing classroom (to be fair, it wasn't designed for classroom use). It should nevertheless stand on a composition scholar's shelf as a reminder of tasks that remain undone: the task of working out a theory as tight and demanding as Vygotsky's for all the systems of "packed, symbolic representations for the self" (215), and that of working out a method for responding to all the "languages of the mind" in the writing classroom.

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Editorial Inkshedding

/// Kay Stewart

This is my first issue as editor of Inkshed. I would like to thank Jim Reither for the years he has devoted to keeping the dialogue alive and lively, and for his generous assistance as his duties passed to me. Relieved of his self-imposed editorial silence, Jim will now serve as far-flung correspondent from the wilds of Minnesota and points south. Thanks from all of us, Jim.

It will take a while before Inkshed returns to the sleek design it achieved under Jim's editorship, unfortunately. My computer is not compatible with Jim's, and changes in the secretarial staff of the English Department (which has promised some assistance) have resulted in a loss of computer expertise there. The University/Community Special Projects Fund has given us money for the Fancy Font program and other supplies, however, and so I hope that before long the newsletter will regain its comely appearance.

What the Special Projects Fund did not provide is operating funds--money for photocopying and postage. So please send renewals and subscriptions as quickly as possible. You will find a subscription form on the last page.

And send material for the newsletter. As you will notice, I have included space on the subscription form for you to describe current research (including research for theses), to suggest types of material you would like to see in the newsletter, and to indicate areas in which you are willing to contribute. I would especially like to hear from those of you who could keep us informed about what is going on in the schools. Chris Bullock (who finked out as co-editor) has agreed to take charge of reviews. You will find a note from him below.

Best wishes to you all as we head into another year of writing and discovery.

AN INVITATION

/// Chris Bullock

The Inkshed Newsletter would like to publish regular reviews of books, textbooks and articles likely to be of interest to its readership. Reviews could be as short as a paragraph or as long as the review in this issue; they could be written in the form that seems most appropriate to writer, readers and subject. We will solicit some material from publishers, but also would encourage you to write on material you already have.

If you are interested in being placed on our list of reviewers, please check the appropriate space on the subscription form.

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