

INKSHED

Newsletter of the Canadian Association
for the Study of Writing and Reading
Volume 8, number 5. February 1990

INSIDE INKSHED

Russ Hunt	A Memo to the Authors	1
Roger Graves	Moving from Revolution to Exploration	4
	Job Notice	8
Dorothy Gray	Conference Notice	8
Kay Stewart	Editorial Inkshedding	9
	Subscription Form	10
	Inkshed VII	11

John & Jan -

This is the Newsletter I mentioned in passing
when we met that fatigued day at youFA
thought you might be interested in subscribing -

Mary-Louise

8.5 February 1990

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Inkshed provides a forum for its subscribers to explore relationships among research, theory, and practice in language acquisition and language use. Subscribers are invited to submit informative pieces such as notices, reports, and reviews of articles, journals, books, textbooks, conferences, and workshops, as well as polemical discussions of events, issues, problems, and questions of concern to teachers in Canada interested in writing and reading theory and practice.

Inkshed is published four times during the academic year. The following is a schedule of submission deadlines and publication dates:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 September, for 15 September | 1 February, for 15 February |
| 1 November, for 15 November | 1 April, for 15 April |

The newsletter is supported financially by the Department of English and the University/Community Special Projects Fund, University of Alberta, and by its subscribers. Make cheques for \$7.00 payable to University of Alberta--*Inkshed*.

[Note: *Common Knowledge: The Development of Understanding in the Classroom* (London: Methuen, 1987) is a book which, among other things, describes a study of some specific teaching instances, in which good teachers were put in touch with good students in ideal circumstances, and what they did was studied intently and deeply, with specific attention to how teachers used language in teaching, and how students responded. Edwards and Mercer show dramatically and graphically how even the best teachers in the best situations find it difficult to let students assume ownership of classroom tasks or play a role in the setting of classroom questions.]

Spring 1989

Derek and Neil--

Here are some of my notes on *Common Knowledge* that I think might be interesting to you and make a bit clearer why I see the book as so engaging in view of my own work with reading and teaching.

The teacher's dilemma which you dramatize so well--the conflict between the teacher's sense that the kids ought to do the discovering for themselves vs. her certain knowledge of what they ought to discover when they do it--is a pedagogical problem because it poisons the social transaction between kids and teacher. I've written elsewhere (references on request) about the way the teacher's position as authority (or as perceived authority, even when the teacher is genuinely a learner in a given situation) renders inauthentic the transactions between student writers and teacher readers, and I think the issue is quite parallel. The consequence of writing for "the teacher as examiner" is that you write not as the possessor of authority but as the person trying to say what the audience/authority wants you to say, and because of that you bracket out your own common sense. Your book elucidates wonderfully for me the way in which schools make it habit-forming to bracket out your own experience and common sense and "play the game." But it seems to me it might make more of another aspect of the situation, the extent to which the kids *could* take ownership of the task they're doing, but don't because the real owner (the teacher) is so clearly present in the transaction. It looks as though the teacher you study here is being pretty heavyhanded in manipulating (for instance) the way the kids generate hypotheses, but I'd suggest that in such a position no amount of teacherly skill and sophistication can do any more than mask the problem. In fact, seen from this viewpoint, the most skilled teacher in the world would be likely to look pretty heavy handed. The answer? I think we have to find ways to get the teacher the hell out of the transaction altogether.

I'm struck by the power of your concept of "cued elicitation." The first time it's mentioned I had a kind of shudder of recognition as I read about that teacher gesticulating and trying to get the kids to say "change the angle" rather than just saying it herself. I've seen lots of good teachers doing that--I've done it myself--and it's always made me uncomfortable. It degenerates quickly into a guessing game (or maybe what happens is that we discover that that's what it's been all along).

It seems odd, then, that at first you don't seem to be coming down as hard on "cued elicitation" as I would. On p. 143 you suggest (very circumspectly,

but nonetheless it's there) that it can fall into, or serve as a useful structure within, the Vygotskian "Zone of Proximal Development." You say, "It is a device which requires that the pupils actively participate in the creation of shared knowledge, rather than merely sit and listen to the teacher talking."

Well, it does require that the pupils actively participate in *something*, that's for sure, and I guess it's the reason I (and so many of my colleagues) have used it so much. But *what* exactly it is they're participating in is the question that bothers me; nothing about it feels to me like creating shared knowledge. Now under the right circumstances, even reading or listening to a lecture can actually, if the relationships are right, be a "mutual creation of shared knowledge" (neither of them are, of course, merely passive, and either of them *can* be pretty active). But it feels to me that this kind of guessing game is one in which there isn't a lot that's mutual. I suppose maybe the kid who could listen actively and construct knowledge from a lecture or a book could probably make this kind of guessing game active as well. But when you describe that girl who changes her mind in response to the teacher's merely re-asking the question, it's pretty clear that whatever she's doing, it isn't knowledge building. Your parenthetical qualification--"the pupils should (apparently, at least) generate their own understanding" (142)--says it all. And of course by page 146 it's become clearer that our views are parallel: "The danger of cued elicitation is that, until it is examined closely, it can give a false impression (presumably to the participants as well as to the observers) of the extent to which pupils understand...what they are saying." I guess I'd be more likely to say that it isn't "The danger of" (that sounds to me like a suggestion that it might be a risk worth taking) as "The inescapable consequence of." But I'm always an extremist.

I was struck by the quote from Habermas about needing "complete symmetry among the partners" (157) for the authentic creation of common knowledge. When you say later that asymmetry is necessary in the Zone of Proximal Development, I wonder about whether we're talking about two quite different kinds of symmetry. Asymmetry of knowledge is necessary for any act of communication to be authentic--I need to know or understand, or think I know or understand, something you don't, but might, in order to engage in a conversational exchange that will be satisfying. But maybe symmetrical in terms of social power? The way I'd put it, I think, is that we need symmetry in terms of power and asymmetry in terms of authority or knowledge--but, now that I think of it, I'd also want to make a distinction between "asymmetry" (which means that the two sides have different things) and having nothing on the one hand and everything on the other, which is the usual teaching situation.

I think the Hood, McDermott & Cole (1980) contention that "teachers are often perceived primarily as sources of punishment" (even though I've cited it too) oversimplifies a bit. The problem isn't only teachers being seen as sources of *punishment*: it's just as bad when they're seen as sources of *reward*. There are a number of studies on "extrinsic rewards" in which some participants were paid to play games and others volunteered--ostensibly to study something about the playing. At the end the main difference was that when they were told the study was over, the volunteers tended to finish the game, while the paid subjects tended to quit. I think that's a profoundly important and resonant finding--if we believe people need to be involved in things to learn from them, anyway.

Early on (p. 13), you talk about understanding the apparently tautological statement "the president of France is the president of France, but the president

of America is the president of America." It's clear that statement's a wonderful example of the power of Grice's conversational maxims. Speech act theory rides again. Since we assume the speaker *must* be making sense, we look for a way in which that apparently nonsensical or pointless utterance can be *interpreted* to be sensible or pointed, just as Grice says we do.

But what triggers the *invocation* of a conversational maxim? What makes us act that way? I know lots of cases where people would dismiss that as nonsense (for instance, Doug Vipond and I have studied lots of readers who almost certainly would have. And we've all had lots of students who'd have responded in that way if asked to explain the sentence.)

Your formulation in the book is "the apparent breaking of the maxim...leads us" to understand it. It *doesn't* seem to make sense; it *ought* to; so we try again. The only thing that could do that would be a reader/listener's expectation that certain maxims will be *kept*. I think our reading research shows that there are some conditions under which it's a lot more likely that a reader will expect that. It's also, I think, arguable that it's not a toggle switch (Grice on, Grice off), but a dial of intensity, and the dial setting is affected by the reader/listener's background, the cues provided (or not) by her transaction with the text, and her understanding of the immediate situation. If teachers do what you show them doing, the situation won't push them to expect much intentional coherence.

For me one of the most powerful ideas in the book is the neat distinction between abstraction on the one hand and disconnection from authentic personal experience on the other. I have been coming for years toward an understanding of just how radically and thoroughly school invites us (or virtually forces us) to cut off what we're doing there from our own experience and from common sense. As a literature teacher I've seen an awful lot of evidence that people assume that the kinds of texts school offers have nothing to do with your authentic self, but only with the little chunks of synthetic school-self you've secreted over the years. What Vipond and I call "dialogic" or "point-driven" reading is really a result of someone in some particular situation being able to escape that and take a text as though it were immediately relevant, an occasion for a social transaction (to assume that an utterance is going to make sense, for instance).

There's a lot more to be said, but as Humpty Dumpty says, that's plenty to go on.

--Russ

References

- Edwards, Derek, and Neil Mercer. *Common Knowledge: The Development of Understanding in the Classroom*. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Grice, H. Paul. "Logic and Conversation." In *Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 3: Speech Acts*, ed. P. Cole and J. Morgan. New York: Academic Press, 1975.
- Hood, L., R. McDermott and M. Cole. "'Let's Make it a Good Day'--Some Not So Simple Ways." *Discourse Processes* 3 (1980), 155-168.

Department of English
St. Thomas

In the March 1989 edition of *Inkshed* and at the Canadian caucus at the *Conference on College Composition and Communication*, James Reither called for a revolution in the way we teach writing. "We need to be more courageously experimental in our teaching than most have been willing to be" if we are to design writing courses more closely allied to our ideological beliefs about writing: students must have authority in the classroom over their own knowing and writing, teachers should intervene only at "stuck-points and teaching points," assignments must be rhetorical (driven by student interest and need), and teachers should function as facilitators (12-13). The course I am proposing here makes a start in that direction by basing its practices on current theories about literacy, the teaching of writing, gender differences in learning, and how minority cultures should be represented in the university. I offer it as a conversational gambit in the form of a polemical essay, a conversation that I hope as many Inkshedders as possible will join and use to help us imagine how we could teach writing better. I offer it as an exploration because I want to change the metaphor from revolving around a set of activities to something more like exploring--setting a new, uncharted direction.

Rationale

First-year students need to learn the discourse of the university more than they need anything else if they are to survive and prosper. The focus of this course will be to explore what it means to write at a university. Of course, because discourse conventions and the uses of writing vary from discipline to discipline, one of the main goals and activities for students will be to research and explore these conventions.

Coupled with the need to explore the discourse communities of the university is the need for students to become aware of what writing is in its broadest definition as literate behaviour. They need to learn (through observing and modelling) literate cognitive strategies--to think like university people--as well as to participate in the rituals of the university, value the same kinds of knowledge, and learn what constitutes valid demonstration or proof in this literate scene before they can coordinate this new kind of intellectual world with their other, previous, and coexistent experiences of knowledge and literacy. On a more personal level, students will explore their own literate behaviours in writing which focuses on non-academic discourse. Life outside school (before coming to the university or at home), together with readings from a cross-section of Canadian culture, will attempt to establish a dialectic between the discourse of the university and the discourses of family, friends, and other cultures. We will attempt to write and read our way into an understanding of competing or complementary discourses through our explorations.

Through this exercise in reading, writing and analyzing, we will all come to understand better what we are doing at the university; this understanding will result in a surer command of the rhetorical exigencies of both home and school. In addition, our practice in writing should provide ideas or theories about discourse that we can then research through reading, questioning, and observing literate behaviour in other disciplines--not just the writing, but the public seminars and other aspects of schooling in various disciplines. This process will promote further changes in our writing and reading in this class.

Goals

The central goal of this course is to help students come to a greater understanding of literate behaviours at universities. Universities, of course, are highly literate places--from their libraries down to their parking stickers --"A," "B," "C." A first-year writing course is the one place where students might have an opportunity to discuss, argue and study the literate behaviour that governs what goes on there.

As well as coming to an understanding of these literate behaviours, students will work towards an increasing ability to function as participants as well as observers. One of the major uses for writing at universities is evaluation, either in tests or essays. For this reason alone, students need to understand how this evaluation takes place and what assumptions drive it. A second major goal, then, is to learn to write in academic environments. If students have had little exposure to writing at all, or only exposure to the *belles-lettres*/ literary criticism view of what writing can be, they will need to learn how they write: what processes they follow, what strategies work for which kinds of writing, what other possible processes are possible, what heuristics and schemes of arrangement exist, what ways of developing a syntactically and semantically "mature" style are available to them, how to speak (and write) publicly, and how to write alone and as part of groups.

Activities and Assignments

There will be no tests or exams in this course; evaluation will depend on 1) each student's portfolio of writings which will accumulate as they write various assignments through the term, 2) each student's contributions (written and otherwise) to the collaborative publication, 3) each student's participation in responding to other students' writing, and 4) participation in class discussions.

Assignments will fall into the following categories:

- a) *day-book writings*: these are daily writings of varying length on topics chosen by the student. They are exploratory in nature but public in the sense that other students and the teacher will read them weekly. Notes and observations on the literate behaviours they observe and observations on their writing processes will comprise much of this writing.
- b) *essays*: these will be written in response to the readings in the course. They will be created through a process of reading, discussion, drafting, responding, drafting, and responding that ends when the student feels the essay has progressed as far as she or he wants to take it (these essays form part of the portfolio for evaluation at the end of the term). The genre or modes of student writing will not be specified; students must instead analyze and write for rhetorical situations that arise from their reading, discussion, and other writings. Much of this part of the course will use peer-resounding, class-discussion, and public reading of essays as ways of developing student proficiency in creating writing.
- c) *collaboration project*: student observations and participation in their other courses and the activities of the university (public seminars, library work, student organizations, administrative regulations) will form the material from which a publication entitled "Writing from the inside: A

guide to writing at the university" will be produced. This booklet will be given to the next group of students who enter the course.

Texts

Student writing will form much of the text for this course: day-book observations written by students will become texts for other students, as will various versions of their essays; the collaborative project will be formed out of student writings in day-books but also out of "texts" in the sense that Robert Scholes uses that word. For Scholes, a text can be a painting; to "read" it is to interpret it semiotically as a set of signs. Pictures, posters, and graffiti then can be included with the texts the class creates or produces.

Another set of texts (photocopies) will be readings from across disciplines in the university, both those produced by students for courses and those used as parts of textbooks. These readings will help to widen the scope of student observations and writings in the day-book and to suggest other places to investigate as sources of literate behaviour.

A more traditional group of texts will be readings from across Canadian culture: "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" by George Ryga, *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje, and *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa. These texts will present different uses for literacy as part of the contrasting cultures that they describe.

A rhetoric text such as Lisa Ede's *Work in Progress* will be used to guide students in studying their own writing processes. The sections on academic writing in that book will also contribute to the class's thinking about discourse in the university.

Finally, texts in this course will also consist of literacy events as Shirley Brice Heath uses that term: "Those occasions in which the talk revolves around a piece of writing" (386). For the students in this course, "texts" can include classrooms in which they observe (either as students enrolled in the course or as observers) the ways knowledge is constructed. One example could be the biology laboratory: students are given a quick set of instructions, collect the appropriate equipment, perform a set of tasks, and then "write it up." Observations of this sort will be particularly important for the collaborative project as students work to construct theories of what it means to write for different disciplines.

Critique

Perhaps the most important epistemological assumption of this course is the belief that knowledge is constructed, not found. Much of the course depends on the construction of knowledge by students about discourse communities at the university as a whole as well as of the discourses of various disciplines. Closely allied with this belief is the assumption that students can and should create texts rhetorically (to meet the demands of a particular purpose, audience, and situation) that will be read and responded to publicly and which will lead to further texts and discussions. Throughout the course students have the responsibility to actively investigate this new world of the university; my belief here is that the active enquiry will train students to become researchers as well as practitioners of writing. This combination of research and practice should lead students to theorize about what writing is for them and what writing is in different situations (disciplines). Throughout the course students read,

respond, and discuss writings with each other and work collaboratively on a major writing project; my belief here is that knowledge is created not by discrete individuals but by individuals working in tandem with others and developing knowledge in response to the writings of others.

I believe that portfolio assessment is the fairest method of evaluation (in the sense of allowing student achievement to most nearly reflect student competence). Evaluation should also be used to enhance development, not merely to assess it; this kind of evaluation will take place throughout the term as both students and teacher respond to student writing. I also believe that students will become better writers if they study themselves as writers and reflect on what they are doing. The day-book will help to do this by having the students record their observations about their writing, and the study of rhetorical theory in Lisa Ede's text will propose ways of expanding the range of strategies available to them.

To what extent, however, will the knowledge and theories produced by these students simply reproduce the dominant culture and inequalities present in literate modes at universities? If most university discourse is dominated by male models of knowing--agonistic debate, repeated "tests" or trials, predominantly individual work habits--how does this course empower female students? One way is by structuring the evaluation and production of knowledge in this course around collaborative investigation and portfolio marking. The role of the instructor in this course is to contrast different discourses, force them together and establish them as the subjects as well as the objects of the course rather than to reify the dominant mode. Different discourses and different ways of knowing must be allowed to co-exist, and the students must be allowed to find them, evaluate them, and reject or accept them based on their perceptions, discussions, and writings. The focus of the course is on exploring what it means to write, not on inculcating a particular discourse.

What do you think? Should writing in a Canadian context be any different from writing in an American context? What intersections between culture and writing should we incorporate in writing courses? How should we deal with issues of gender in our writing courses? What kinds of writing should we privilege? And what place do we allow our students in the writing course: how should we negotiate their interests and backgrounds against the interests and backgrounds of the institution they are encountering. Please write.

English Department
The Ohio State University

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

ONE TENURABLE POSITION

The Department of English, University of Alberta, invites applications for a tenurable position at the Assistant Professor level, effective July 1, 1990, or July 1, 1991. The salary at the floor of the Assistant Professor in 1989-90 was \$33,144. Availability of the position is subject to budgetary approval. Applicants should have a completed Ph.D. or be close to finishing it by the time of the appointment; teaching experience is essential, and publications are preferred. This position is open only to specialists in modern language--composition--rhetoric. The successful candidate will be expected to take a strong role in helping to plan and administer the Department's courses in composition and rhetoric, from first year to graduate levels. Candidates should ask three references to send letters directly to

Dr. Maurice Legris, Chair
Department of English
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
T6G 2E5

Candidates should also send to the Chair a letter of application, a complete *curriculum vitae*, and the names of the referees, and arrange for the Chair to receive graduate and undergraduate transcripts. Deadline for the applications is April 30, 1990. Only complete applications received by the deadline will be considered; candidates are responsible for ensuring that transcripts and letters of reference are received by the Department. The University of Alberta is committed to the principle of equity in employment, but in accordance with Canadian Immigration requirements, this advertisement is directed to Canadian Citizens and permanent residents of Canada; citizenship or residence status should be indicated in the application.

If none of the applicants is judged to be suitable, this position will be re-advertised in the Fall of 1990.

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Many thanks to Sandra Mallett and Astrid Blodgett for their efficient handling of *Inkshed* business while I was away during the fall. The delay in getting out this issue is wholly my responsibility.

* * * * *

According to the organizers of Inkshed VI (Rick Coe, Anne Hungerford, Susan Stevenson), there is a profit of about \$1000 left over from the conference. They would like Inksheddors' comments about what should be done with this surplus. Some possibilities:

- Subsidize graduate student registrations at this year's conference
- Subsidize *EQ* (or the journal that takes its place)
- Subsidize the newsletter (possibly by buying software that would pass to each editor)
- Formalize the status of CAASWAR (the Canadian Association for the Advanced Study of Writing and Reading) in the event that CCTE does away with the national conference.

Please send your comments on these and other possibilities by April 1 for inclusion in the next newsletter. A decision will likely be reached at Inkshed VII. Until that time, the money will quietly draw interest.

* * * * *

In September I invited submissions for a special issue on job opportunities (or the lack thereof) in rhetoric and composition in Canada, funding of writing courses, programs and research, and related concerns. That invitation is again open for the next issue, deadline April 1.

Elsewhere you will find an announcement for a position in rhetoric and composition at the University of Alberta; this is the third time we've tried to fill this position. There is a good possibility that in the absence of a suitable Canadian candidate, the department will request permission to hire an American. Why have we had trouble filling this position? If you are a potential candidate for this or future jobs, what type of position are you interested in/preparing yourself for? What constraints are you operating under?

* * * * *

Several subscribers have asked for a directory of members' research interests and E-mail addresses. Unless I hear objections, I will start compiling such a list. If you would like to add to the information on your subscription form, please send a brief description of your current research (200 words or less) and/or your computer address as soon as possible.

* * * * *

A reminder--subscriptions are due for the academic year. Check your address label--if it doesn't indicate "89-90" (or later), please send your cheque IMMEDIATELY. Funds are low.

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Research/teaching interests _____

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Research in progress (including theses--descriptions up to 200 words will appear in the newsletter periodically) _____

_____ (attach sheet if necessary)

Material you would like to see in the newsletter: _____

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