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ABSTRACT

"Inkshedding" grew out of a process of trying to make "freewriting" into something dialogically transactional. The idea was to give writing a social role in a classroom, and thus to create a situation in which the writing was read by real readers, to understand and respond to what was said rather than to evaluate and "help" with the writing. In classes students were asked to freewrite in response to a shared experience--a reading, a class discussion, an event--and then pass the freewritten texts around and ask readers to mark passages in which the writer said something that seemed interesting or new. The word "inkshedding" comes from the Oxford English Dictionary. The ways in which inkshedding functions--and the ways it has been substantiated--have grown and changed since then. One important way was that text composed in such a situation has more likelihood, even with novice writers, to be formed with an anticipation of audience. A number of ways of organizing situations to make the reading more central and more influential--more salient--have evolved. Some publications now deal in more or less explicit and extended ways with inkshedding. (NKA)

What Is "Inkshedding"?

by Russell A. Hunt

What is "inkshedding"?

[note: this text is undergoing revision as a result of extensive comments made on a draft by participants in the sixteenth Inkshed Working Conference. Bookmark this site and come back; things will be changing frequently as long as this notice is here. If you want to help in this process by making comments, raising questions, asking for clarification, registering objections, suggesting additions, etc., please feel free; the easy way is to send me email at hunt@StThomasU.ca.]

A history lesson

"Inkshedding" began as a practice in the early eighties, when Jim Reither and I began trying to make "freewriting" (which we had learned about from writers like Peter Elbow) into something dialogically transactional. Actually, we didn't articulate what we wanted in quite that way, at the time: what we said we wanted was to give writing a social role in a classroom, and thus to create a situation in which the writing was read by real readers, to understand and respond to what was said rather than to evaluate and "help" with the writing.

We did this in our classes by asking students to freewrite in response to a shared experience -- a reading, a class discussion, an event -- and then passing the freewritten texts around and asking readers to mark passages in which the writer said something "striking," something that seemed to them interesting or new or outrageous. We then arranged for the most-often marked passages to be transcribed, photocopied, and distributed at the next class meeting.

Jim Reither came up with the word "inkshed," having found it in the Oxford English Dictionary. It wasn't exactly a description of what we were doing; the Oxford offers it as a "humourous" word, meaning "the shedding or spilling of ink; consumption or waste of ink in writing." The word was used by Marvell and Sterne, but our favorite quotation was from Carlyle: "With no bloodshed . . . but with immense beershed and inkshed."

The ways in which inkshedding functions -- and the ways in which it has been instantiated -- have grown and changed, of course, since then. In some ways it turned out to be a reasonable synecdoche for my basic stance as a teacher, which has been focused on finding ways to foster growth in literacy by making it more directly and perceptibly instrumental. Inkshedding turned out to have a number of implications, many of which we hadn't anticipated at all.

For me, maybe the most important was that text composed in such a situation has more likelihood -- even with novice writers -- to be formed with an anticipation of audience (what James Britton called "shaping at the point of utterance" requires, it has always seemed to me, some pressure from the need to address a particular interlocutor or discourse situation. It's not always true the first few times a group or individual engages in it, but over a few experiences telltale evidences of the impact of the pressure of audience (which the writer may or may not be conscious of), like clarity of handwriting and increased explicitness of reference, emerge.

It's also important that ideas, positions, and questions which would not otherwise attain a hearing have a better opportunity to get "on the floor" than they would in an oral discussion. A significant force in the original impetus for using inkshedding in classrooms was the perception that classroom discussions tend to be dominated by a few voices. This is natural, as the "bandwidth" for classroom discussion -- at least for whole class discussions -- is very narrow. Only one voice can be heard at any one time: for what everyone thought about an event to be articulated and discussed is not only practically difficult, even in a small class, but socially constraining: the first few utterances tend very strongly to determine and focus the range of discussion, and constrain the kinds of questions or issues which will be raised. Anthony Paré, in a comment on an earlier draft of this piece, says, "I've always felt that inkshedding allowed for the individual exploration of a top-of-the-head response before that response is deflected, diminished, or destroyed by the first question or comment spoken out loud. Inkshedding allows each member of the group to 'gather' her/his thoughts before they are scattered by that first, articulate, confident person who gets up to say what you weren't even thinking about."

What written discussion tends to do is broaden the bandwidth -- everyone in the room can, as it were, talk at once. [Marcy and Doug on bandwidth vs synchronic & asynchronic.]

But what is, it seems to me, even more important is that every idea or response has a chance not only to be formed in the first place, but also to be "heard."

That "hearing" is important. What is often overlooked in this situation is the importance of *reading.* Writing, of course, had been seen as central from the very beginning, in the origins of the practice as freewriting, which just happened to be read. But what differentiates the social practice of inkshedding from what we might call the expressivist practice of freewriting is that the text is *read.* And even more, that the text is read in what we can characterize as "dialogic" ways -- that is, read *for what it says, dialogically*, not in order to evaluate it or to help the writer improve her text. And because the reading occurs immediately, and in public, the writer has a good chance to come to realize this. The nature of this reading, and the social transaction it affords, is an issue which has come to seem increasingly important. The concept of "transaction" -- in the sense defined by Dewey and Bentley, in their *Knowing and the Known* -- is central here, because it reminds us that no component of the process can be understood or characterized outside the process. The writer is influenced by the reading, and her understanding of that reading, as much as the reader is influenced by the writer, and the whole event itself cannot be understood outside its relation to preceding and subsequent events, in what Peirce called the infinite web of semiosis. As Anthony Paré points out in a marginal note, "Texts are located in an intertextual web. This is something students don't (can't) get, since their texts are not linked to other texts. Students eavesdrop on the disciplinary conversation and report what they've heard; they don't *join* the conversation. They are intellectual voyeurs. Inkshedding gets them into the action."

A number of ways of organizing situations to make this reading more central and more influential -- more salient -- have evolved. At the beginning, we asked for small teams of volunteer editors to read all the inksheds produced on a given occasion, marking with vertical lines in the margin passages which they found "striking." The more people who found a passage striking, the more vertical lines accumulated; a secretary could, in theory, simply transcribe passages in a fairly mechanical way, beginning with those with the most vertical lines. The transcribed passages could be photocopied and distributed for a subsequent meeting of class, to start off a further discussion (or another session of inkshedding) with the ideas which

had survived this evolutionary pruning process.

Early on, the decisions of the "editorial committee" became a subject of dispute -- everyone wanted to read everything (or, being a bit more cynical, perhaps everyone wanted *her own* writing to be read by everyone else). One response to this was to post all the inksheds on the wall; what this meant, however, was that in practice very few were read -- in general, only those with extremely clear handwriting. Another response was to allow a "reading time" immediately after the inkshedding, in which anyone could read anybody else's, and mark "striking" passages for transcription. These "reading times" often become one of the most powerful moments in my own teaching and conference participation, as people silently exchange sheets of paper, and a "discussion" occurs in almost complete silence, punctuated by *sotto voce* expressions of agreement or outrage, or laughter. There is something particularly powerful about the fact that the reading and selection is being done immediately, or as one commentator on this draft put it, "in real time."

[the anonymity question]

A further extension of this process -- especially if there's a pressure for an immediate discussion, rather than waiting for the process of transcription and copying -- involves asking individuals to find one passage from someone else's inkshed to read aloud. This elevates reading to an even more central position in the process, and is especially powerful for novice writers. One of the most important educational aspects of inkshedding, for me, is the way it foregrounds and dramatizes the transactional nature of text. For many students, especially those who have difficulties, or limited experience, with writing and reading, text has never been the basis of an authentic social transaction -- beyond, perhaps, a thank you note to a distant grandmother. The process of creating an identity and a role in a group through written text, as they do every day through oral utterance, is one in which they have never engaged. And it is my belief that this process is the defining mark of the fully literate person.

Inkshedding moved toward becoming an institution when, in response to discussions among Canadian delegates to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and influenced by the powerful collegial informality of the Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English, Jim Reither and I organized the first "Inkshed Working Conference" in Fredericton, in 1984. One of the features of the conference was that we conducted discussions after sessions by means of inkshedding, taking the "edited" inksheds and transcribing, photocopying and publishing the most-marked passages within a few hours of the session. The first morning of the conference, the edited inksheds from the opening evening session were distributed at breakfast, and their impact on the conference was profound.

The next year, Chris Bullock and Kay Stewart at the University of Alberta and Grant MacEwen Community College organized a second conference in Alberta, and within a year or so there was a regular newsletter (edited for the first few years by Jim Reither), and an annual national conference dedicated not only to exploring literacy and learning, but to extending and testing the limits of the ways in which scholarly or professional conferences can be organized, and attracting writing teachers, English and education professors, public school teachers, graduate students, and others (regularly, the conference and the listserv have included a bracing range of disciplinary perspectives -- from writing teachers at the Bank of Canada to professors of religious studies, from tutors in writing centers to cognitive psychologists and professors of engineering).

There is now a national organization, the Canadian Association for the Study of Language and Learning, an

Inkshed Newsletter (currently edited under revolving editorship based at St. Thomas University, the University of Toronto, and the University of Calgary), an annual conference now in its sixteenth year (for the website supporting and reporting on the most recent conference, in May 1999 near Montréal, click here) ; "Inkshed Publications," an occasional publisher of monographs, based at the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg, and an electronic listserv, CASLL.

I've listed below some publications dealing in more or less explicit and extended ways with inkshedding. They will be pillaged to become part of the final text of my work in progress, *Becoming a Dialogic Teacher*. The entire text of each of those marked as a link is available, as published, on this Web site.

Electronic Inkshedding

What has perhaps been most important about inkshedding for me is the power of its basic idea -- that writing written in the expectation of reading and response, especially *immediate* reading and response, will do more to engage the writer in making, using Linda Flower's term, "reader-based" decisions in an active way than writing whose reader has to be imagined up out of whole cloth. It was clear from the moment I began to explore electronic networks as a medium for th exchange of texts that the potential for that immediacy was, at least potentially, powerfully enhanced by electronic mediation.

Thus, the fundamental ideas involved in the practice of inkshedding have extended inexorably into, and shaped, the increasing use of computer-mediated writing and reading in my teaching. As, over the past few years, students arrive in my classes with more and more experience with computers and computer networks, it has become increasingly rare for paper-based pen-and-ink inkshedding to continue in my courses much beyond the second or third week of class. Very quickly new forms supplant the use of pen and paper, or hard copy of printed text.

[there needs to be a discussion here of synchronic and asynchronic forums, and the fuzzy space between them, and the way moving students into that fuzzy space is parallel to moving into the zone of proximal development helping them experience, and see, that literacy can be instrumentally social, that reading can be an active participation in a social context].

Contextualized reading

I wrote something about the nature of this contextualized reading on a now-defunct HyperNews forum discussing a presentation at the Inkshed 14 conference; the specific occasion was student writing on an electronic forum rather than classical "inkshedding," but the general point remains relevant, I think. What I said was there was in response to a comment from Roger Graves about reading and writing that is electronically mediated. In part, he said, "I just read some of the . . . discussion on Will's ["Will's Virtual Restoration and Eighteenth Century Coffeehouse," the electronic forum established as part of my eighteenth-century literature class in the 1997-98 academic year], and I was trying to decide what was different about it -- different from face-to-face/classroom talk. I think some of those things woudn't be said. . . . I think there is a different quality to the talk here, and I think not having to say it to a room of people who might laugh *while you're still physically present* makes it easier for some people to say/write things. So a) this wouldn't have happened without the technology, and b) the quality of critical thought seems measurably better."

I said, "I think, yes, it does make a difference that people aren't physically present (and that's not always a good difference: it allows people the freedom to say potentially risky things like this, but it also affords flaming). But I think -- I started thinking more seriously about this on the way home from the conference -- that a much more important difference is *the way these texts are read.*

"An "outsider" to this discussion simply can't read the texts the way a member of it can, because the member is reading with the constant knowledge that her role is to *respond.* She's expected to (indeed, she's required to, in some sense: she can choose which to respond to, but if she chooses not to respond at all she essentially elminates herself from the class).

"I think that knowledge that you're reading *as a member of the discourse community* changes the way you read in ways that are a whole lot more than trivial. It makes you a Bakhtinian reader ("understanding is nothing more nor less than the preparation of a response" -- that's not accurately quoted, but it's close enough for government work) with a vengeance. You're a member of the community in the same way that I'm a member of (say) the 4Cs community, or -- for a better example, maybe, because smaller and more intimate -- the Inkshed one. And I think that awareness also changes what you'll write, and how.

I thought of this as, for the second time, I tried to show people a text taken out of this context and demonstrate how it exemplifies the sort of discourse produced out of this community. People who aren't members of the community read the text differently (the one I used was Jay's comment on Satan, and it's very difficult to help people see the way it's a move in the conversation on Will's rather than a "public" text (a move in a larger conversation). This is a more complicated and rich distinction than it seems, stated flatly like that: I'm not simply pointing to the jocularity of tone, the personal references, etc., *in the text*, but to the parts of it that a reader who is part of the group will attend to and foreground.

"Some Strategies for Embedding Writing in Dialogic Situations." *The Point: The Newsletter of SCENT - UPEI's Senate Committee on the Enhancement of Teaching* 5.1 (June 1996): 3-4.

"Traffic in Genres, In Classrooms and Out." *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, ed. Peter Medway and Aviva Freedman. 212-230. London: Taylor & Francis, 1994.

"Affordances and Constraints of Electronic Discussions," as presented at the 13th Inkshed Working Conference (Hecla Island, Manitoba), May 1996.

Among the participants at the conference who have offered me what I might call "chipmunk" responses -- referring to my essay on Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet*, and the tendency of the chipmunk in that story to be scared when a poem is scary -- the following signed their marginalia: Marcy Bauman, Doug Brent, Jamie MacKinnon, Kenna Manos, and Anthony Paré. I am equally grateful to those who did not.

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