Mary-Louise Craven

York University

Inkshed Conferences: Transforming the Conference into a Conversation[1]

We "Inkshedders" are a curiously collaborative crew who rely heavily on the word "inkshed"—as an adjective (as in *Inkshed Newsletter*), as a noun (as in defining us as "inkshedders") and as a verb ("to inkshed"); while this article is a report on Inkshed conferences, it is impossible to isolate the conferences from the activity and the people. Inkshedders are committed to the principle of "inkshedding," which we do not only when we attend the annual Inkshed conferences, but also when we write for the Inkshed newsletter; some of us also promote "inkshedding" among our non-Inkshed colleagues and try to transform our classrooms into places where inkshedding can flourish. "Inkshedding," or the "shedding of ink," is our raison d'etre; it might, as Rick Coe, of Simon Fraser University, has suggested, even constitute something like a genre. Inkshedding allows for written reactions to ideas presented in papers to be circulated among conference attendees; later some inksheds are published in the Inkshed newsletter.[2] Russ Hunt, of St. Thomas University, has said it's an attempt to do something about dreary conferences at which one paper session with two perfunctory ceremonial questions is followed by another. The newsletter (and now two listservs) also serve to extend the unusual conversation of Inkshed conferences.

Why "unusual" conversation? Because the "conversation" during an Inkshed conference means more than the verbal give and take at the usual conferences: the first Inkshed conference (at St. Thomas University) came about because Jim Reither and Russ Hunt wanted to test and demonstrate the Inkshed conviction that conversations in writing could be more valuable, and valuable in different ways, than oral conversations—even at a conference. Inkshed members believed that interactional writing such as that represented by Inkshedding would radically change the nature of the conversation. Not only would people who were ordinarily silent or nearly silent in such circumstances be given voice, but everyone would be able to say more. But more important than that, they would say different kinds of things. They would be less prone to assume the secondary role given to auditors in question periods. Instead, because respondents would have time to fill a page or two with writing, their utterances in the conversation would be more exploratory, more dialogical, and more persuasive than oral comments. Respondents in writing would develop ideas the same way presenters developed their ideas. Such writing would force presenters to share the floor with those who wrote and were read. Everyone would be a presenter.

In these ways Inkshedding would enrich, deepen, and extend the conversation. In fact, Inkshedding would transform the conference into a conversation (Reither, CASLL listserv). For Roger Graves, of DePaul University, this kind of "conversation" is extremely important, for it redefines "social thought processes":

> For me, inkshedding is not just about making conferences more interesting, although that is important. It isn't just about re-forming the classroom, although that, too, is important. The part of Inkshed that we sometimes forget to mention is the potential it has for nurturing change in classrooms across the country if we continue to work together collaborate—by redefining the social through practices like Inkshedding. If it takes a generation to change practices, Inkshed is more than halfway there (chronologically).

Inkshed then is not just a 2½-day conference attended each year: it's a year-long conversation.

What sets inkshed conferences apart from other conferences, and inkshedders apart from other conference attendees? The metaphor of the pen is crucial to understanding what we are "about." The pen is both the practical and the symbolic tool of this group of writing instructors, even though for those of us with ethernets and modems, there is a concurrent healthy flow of electronic words that travel across two listservs.[3] The pen will continue to be the defining symbol of the Inkshed community, not because this is an organization run by conservative farts (in fact, Inkshed isn't "run" by anyone; it was only two years ago we formed ourselves into a more formal organization called the Canadian Association for the Study of Language and Learning, and only this year that we elected an Executive[4]), but because we flourish using the technology of the pen.

Why is the pen crucial to inkshedding? What is inkshedding, anyway? Inkshedders have come up with a number of metaphors in their attempts to define inkshedding: for instance, it's a "recipe-for-doing" and a "toolshed." While noting that Inkshedding isn't like a formulaic chicken recipe that is franchised out, à la Colonel Sanders, Jim Reither has come up with his understanding of inkshedding as a "recipe-for-doing":

> people share something—a common experience such as a conference presentation they've all heard: an issue that has come up in a discussion and that needs resolving; a reading that has provoked thought— something like that;
>
> people write their take on what they share—responding, criticizing, challenging, pointing out what needs to be emphasized, seen differently, added to the mix;
>
> others immediately (or a least very soon after the writing) read what got written—pens in hand, marking, asterisking, writing comments in the margin—identifying the "good" bits (the well put, the interesting, the

startling, the challenging, whatever) so those marks and that marginalia become part of the reading;.

and (in the original form), what gets marked a lot gets "published" (excerpted and printed out and photocopied; or, in later version, at least read aloud) so that what gets written and read and excerpted becomes part of the ongoing conversation of whatever "larger" event the inkshedding was embedded in . ("What is Inkshedding?" 4)

The "toolshed" metaphor used to describe inkshedding was provided by Susan Drain, a long-time east coast Inkshedder:

Every gardener needs a toolshed: there she winterdreams over seed catalogues, hefts and hones her digging, mulching, pruning tools. Every writer needs an inkshed: wordhoard, dreamplace, tool sharpener. (1)

It is fitting that, as faculty interested in how we and our students think and write, we use metaphors to describe the process—as a small group sharing a common goal, we understand what we mean by these terms, even though we frequently disagree about their precise meanings. At the small Inkshed conferences each person has both a voice and a face. The uniqueness of each person's handwriting reinforces our sense of the importance of his/her unique ideas; each pen wielder is both writer and editor: the face-to-face contacts made at the conferences allow for the later "published" words (in the *Inkshed Newsletter* and now over the Internet, and through the publishing initiatives of the Inkshed organization[5]) to be understood in the context of our own socially constructed setting.

So who exactly are these people wielding their pens? About 150 members make up the organization; while most are teachers (at primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities across Canada and parts of the United States), members also include writing professionals in government and business. Nor are all English teachers: the membership includes social scientists and humanists, with varying ideological biases. That's what makes Inkshed communications so interesting--this is not a homogenous group, although members do share a commitment to the view of writing as "a nonlinear, dialectical process in which the writer continually circles back, reviewing and rewriting" (A. Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning*, cited in Graves and Graves 7). Unfortunately, in both the classroom and the conference room, this kind of writing is often not promoted, as Heather Graves and Roger Graves note in critiquing the university writing environment:

If we accept the view of writing as learning and exploration, we cannot help but notice that in universities, colleges and high schools, written products are evaluated; the process of writing, or exploring ideas, is either not evaluated, or not allowed to happen because opportunities to rewrite papers are denied, except as last-ditch efforts to avoid failure. (7)

While Inkshedders are effecting change in the classroom—by introducing ap-

proaches that include informal writing assignments (like journals and conferencing), and non-traditional collaborative writing assignments, the real measure of our success is the way we have transformed the traditional conference. As Rick Coe has written,

> Inkshedding is a type of free writing (broadly construed). Inkshedding is responsive. Inkshedding is a sharing, collaborative group process. Inkshedding serves to break the linearity of "normal" discussion, lets us hear voices and responses we would likely not hear in traditional discussion. (3)

In that same newsletter, Anthony Paré of McGill emphasizes the dual nature of inkshedding, arguing that "it creates a free space for individual reflection and discourse, [as well as] . . . creating an equal-access space for collective reflection and discourse" (4). By wielding the pen at our conferences as both writer and editor, we can have both private reflection and public responsiveness.

The first Inkshed conference was organized by a group of Inkshed pioneers at St. Thomas University. This past year, the eleventh Inkshed returned to its roots in New Brunswick—organized by Jim Reither (English), Russ Hunt (English), Doug Vipond (Psychology) and Thom Parkhill (Religious Studies). Other conferences have been organized by teams of Inkshedders at Memorial University, the University of Calgary and the University of Alberta, the University of Manitoba, Mount Saint Vincent University, Simon Fraser University, York University, and McGill University . Some practices remain constant: the conference planning has always been carried out collaboratively, and the conferences have been limited to a maximum of 50 people. No concurrent sessions are scheduled, and all participants know that while they may not be giving a paper, they are still full participants in the inkshedding activities. Inkshedders thus work hard at their conferences, but they are also avid socializers: an organized "talent" night is an important part of the proceedings, where the truly talented and the wannabe talented share equal billing.

Conferences are generally organized around a theme. Previous themes have included "What do we mean by process?" (second conference), "The social contexts of writing and reading" (third conference), and "The invention process" (tenth conference). But this past year's conference in Fredericton extended the scope of collaborative activities. Before the conference, everyone who attended was asked to prepare a paper on "How do people learn to write?" After reading abstracts of these papers, groups of four or so formed to discuss their approaches to answering the question, and then the groups collaborated in producing one paper each, to become part of a collection of answers. As the organizers wrote,

> The point of it all is to share ideas, to make sense of some things, and even, perhaps, to get a book written about how people learn to write. We can't know, of course, that we'll get that book, and neither can we know that everything written here will be suitable for such a tome. What we can know is that everyone will learn something, everyone will teach

something, and our community will be all the stronger for it. Frankly, we'll settle for that. (conference handout)

At the point of this writing, the participants are editing their submissions and the conference will publish a "proceedings." As Ann Beer of McGill reported in her review in "A Backward Glance at Inkshed 11,"

some groups had a harmonious and happy collaborative experience; others learned just as much, if not more, by struggling with issues of incompatibility and formal dissonance. In brief, all of us shared the kind of experience that students in collaborative writing classes have to go through every semester. And though the experience could not be identical to that of students (who was grading us?), the process helped us to better understand the difficulties and pleasures of collaborative writing. (9)

Like all Inkshed conferences, the Inkshedders practiced what they pedagogically preached. Next year, in Alberta at Inkshed 12, we will carry on with the collaborative experiment, putting our tools—our pens (and our computers)—where our mouths are.[6]

Notes

1   Two drafts of this article were distributed on the CASLL listserv, and inkshedders' responses were incorporated into this version. Thanks to Ann Beer, Doug Brent, Lorraine Cathrol, Patrick Dias, Susan Drain, Will Garrett-Petts, Roger Graves, John Harker, Henry Hubert, Margaret Procter, Pat Sadowy, and Doug Vipond for their input.

2   In 1986, Jim Reither (an English professor at St. Thomas University and a founding member of Inkshed whose name will pop up in any discussion of Inkshed ideology) wrote " ...Inkshed's not a referred journal. It's just a space that allows us a chance for casual exchanges of information and ideas. It's a place for exploration, not judgment." ("A Couple of Personal Notes" 1)

3   The listservs are CASLL and The Eleven, and are run by Russ Hunt of St.Thomas University.)

4   According to the CASLL constitution, "the aim of the association is to provide a forum and common context for discussion, collaboration, and reflective inquiry in discourse and pedagogy in the areas of writing, reading (including the reading of literature), rhetoric, and language. This aim shall be achieved through:

  i.   developing as much as possible a uniquely Canadian voice and providing an informed Canadian perspective on issues of literacy of national and international importance;

  ii. serving as a forum for communication among various persons and organizations interested in discourse and pedagogy;

  iii. providing a means of communication and cooperation for teachers of writing, reading, and language arts at all levels;

  iv. sponsoring and supporting publications of sound academic and professional interest;

  v.   encouraging and supporting research, collaboration, and investigation in the theory and practice of discourse and pedagogy;

  vi. exploring radically the issues of literacy raised by its members, questioning the processes by which academic orthodoxies are established and become resistant to change;

vii. maintaining national and encouraging international networks for continuing conversations among teachers, researchers, and theoreticians of discourse and pedagogy;

viii. community-building with an emphasis on improving communication between groups and disciplines;

ix. valuing informality, sociability, self-reflexiveness, and interactive/transactive approaches to theory and practice;

x. without being exclusionary, emphasizing social process over product, the humanist and rhetorical over the deterministic; questioning and challenging the privilege of the status quo and giving voice to the marginalized groups;

xi. valuing a visionary approach to the disciplines and being responsive to change.
(It should be noted that these steps toward a more formal organization can be seen as possibly going in the wrong direction. One Inkshedder worries that "all the paraphernalia of organization threatens to erode what is truly unique and valuable about Inkshed and that is its informality and, to use that overused word, collegiality." (John Harker, personal communication, July 25, 1994). It should also be noted that, notwithstanding their "informal" nature, Inkshed conferences have been financially supported by SSHRC.

5 Under the editorship of Laura Atkinson, Sandy Baardman, Pat Sadowy, and Stan Straw, from the University of Manitoba, and Neil Besner from the University of Winnipeg, Inkshed has undertaken to publish annually two books related to "Canadian academics" and teachers' needs for an ongoing vehicle to create and maintain the dialogue on current scholarship, research, and theory in the domains of language study; composition studies; rhetorical studies; the study of texts and how they are composed, read, and used; response to literature study; pedagogy in English studies, language arts and English education; media and communication studies; and related fields." (Straw, et al. 34). As of this writing, two books have been published: Roger Graves' *Writing Instruction in Canadian Universities* and *Contextual Literacy: Writing Across the Curriculum* edited by Catherine Schryer and Laurence Steven.

6 If you'd like a copy of the next *Inkshed Newsletter,* contact James Brown, Mary-Louise Craven, or Leslie Sanders at York University (4700 Keele Street, North York, Ontario M3J 1P3); we're part of the team who has taken over the publication of the *Inkshed Newsletter.*

Works Cited

Beer, Ann. "A Backward Glance at Inkshed 11." *Inkshed* 12.5 (1994): 9.

Coe, Rick. "What is Inkshedding?" *Inkshed* 11.3 (1993): 1.

Drain, Susan. *Inkshed* 3.6 (1984): 1.

Graves, Roger. Personal e-mail, 1 August 1994.

Graves, Heather and Roger Graves. "Writing as Rhetoric." *Inkshed* 8.2 (1989): 7

Harker, John. Personal e-mail, 25 July 1994.

Paré, Anthony. "A Response to Rick Coe" *Inkshed* 11.3 (1993): 4.

Reither, Jim. "A Couple of Personal Notes." *Inkshed* 5.3 (1986): 1.

———. CASLL listerv. 21 February 1994.

———. "What is Inkshedding? CASLL E-Mail Excerpts." *Inkshed* 12.3 (1994): 4.

Straw, Stan, et al., "Call for Proposals: The Inkshed Publication Series." *Inkshed* 10.5 (1992): 34.