Inkshed

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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.

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Editorial Inkshedding: A Call for Proposals

With the next issue of *Inkshed* - the post-conference issue - the newsletter will have been at McGill for three years. For a variety of reasons, including personal time constraints and our sense that *Inkshed* shouldn't stay in one place for too long, we have decided to end our editorial tenure.

In the absence of a formal procedure for transferring the editorship, we are inviting Inkshedders to make proposals for the job of Editor(s). We will pass these proposals on to the CASLL Executive Committee, and we expect that a decision could be made before the next (June) issue of the newsletter, which would leave plenty of time for the new Editor(s) to prepare the October issue.

Our experience suggests a number of concerns any proposal should address:

Vision: Prospective editors should offer a statement of their vision for *Inkshed* - an indication of their goals and intentions. This statement might include, for example, possible changes to *Inkshed's* current editorial policy, publishing schedule, cost, contents, and so on.

Plans for Collaboration: McGill's *Inkshed* experience has been made more possible and pleasant by the work of many hands. Ten of us have had regular or occasional editorial influence, and we strongly encourage would-be editors to consider a possible collaborative enterprise.

Institutional support: The publication of *Inkshed* (as we at McGill have arranged it) has been aided by financial and womanpower contributions from the Faculty. The cost of mailing the newsletter for the past three years has been generously supported by the Dean of Education. Secretarial help - which has included typing, some layout work, and correspondence - has been made available through the kindness of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Prospective editors should investigate potential institutional help and describe it in their proposals.

We have enjoyed our work on *Inkshed* and we recommend the experience to those among you who have the enthusiasm and time to devote to the task. Send your proposals to us at the address on the masthead **no later than June 6, 1994.**

Anthony Paré
Ann Beer

Roland Barthes: Apostle of Desire

In the last three decades there has been a scholarly ferment in literary, linguistic, and pedagogical theory. Fundamental assumptions about language, knowledge, reality, and personality have been re-examined, exploded, and reconstructed. The study of literature and language has been interwoven with studies in anthropology, history, psychoanalysis, feminism, philosophy, and politics. Never in the history of literary and language studies has so much attention been devoted to issues of theory. Still, this current eruption of interest in theory has had only a minimal influence on the practice of teaching English Language Arts in schools. My contention is that teachers and students need a clearly formulated theoretical infrastructure for enhanced success in their experiences with language in school and out of school. They need to be more self-reflexive about their teaching and reading and writing practices and the assumptions that guide their practices. For meeting this need the current academic interest in theory has generated a treasure trove of terminology, concepts, and perspectives which can refurbish English Language Arts instruction and experience in schools.

Among the timely voices which inform current literary and linguistic and pedagogical theory is the voice of Roland Barthes. I think English teachers will find Barthes' ideas provocative and workable guides for the classroom. In introducing Roland Barthes, I am like the smiling woman who gives away thimbles of ginger ale and bits of spiced Maple Leaf bologna at the local supermarket. She isn't giving away a meal (not even a satisfying appetizer), but her samples sometimes motivate the customers to the realization that even though ginger ale and bologna weren't on their grocery lists, they can't face tomorrow without them.

Certainly I can offer no comprehensive study of Barthes. His ideas cannot be reduced to a system. Nor can I even be sure that I really understand Barthes - he moves from project to project with bewildering speed and mutable interests. Jonathan Culler advises:

> Though it would be a challenge to seek out a unifying, underlying desire, hoping thus to discover the "true Barthes," it seems truer to Barthes - truer to the corpus of his writings and to the nature of his engagement with his times -to let him remain a chameleon, who participates with vigour and inventiveness in a series of very different projects. Instead of seeking a reductive unity, one should allow him to retain his vitality as a man of parts, engaged in a range of valuable general enterprises that may not have a common denominator. (16)

So, I will not try to analyze or explain Barthes. Instead, I intend to engage in a conversation with him, a reflective conversation, and thereby provide a glimpse of Barthes with the hope that others will want to engage in conversation with him, too. About Barthes, Susan Sontag observes, "Teacher, man of letters, moralist, philosopher of culture, connoisseur of strong ideas; protean autobiographer ... of all the intellectual notables who have emerged since World War II in France, Roland Barthes is the one whose work I am most certain will endure" (vii). When Barthes died in 1980 he was sixty-five years old; the formidable and popular author of many books on topics as wide-ranging as literary criticism, Japanese culture, fashion, romance, and photography, as well as a

prestigious professor at the College de France, he was revered for his keen perception and creative intelligence.

Culler suggests that Barthes' enterprises "may not have a common denominator," but I think that all of Barthes' diverse interests spring from his affection for language. All his life he revelled in the pleasure of language, and I think his words, spoken and written, as well as his example, are instructive for English Language Arts educators. For what can be more important for English teachers than to be revellers in language? In "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?" Barthes insists:

> Language cannot be considered as a simple instrument - utilitarian or decorative - of thought. Man does not exist prior to language, either as a species or as an individual. We never encounter a state where man is separated from language, which he then elaborates in order to "express" what is happening within him: it is language which teaches the definition of man, not the contrary. (*Rustle* 12-13)

According to Barthes, "our civilization...is a civilization of words" (*Grain* 31), and "everything is language, nothing escapes language, all of society is permeated by language" (*Grain* 153). The epistemological implications of this view are obviously far-reaching, but I am concerned right now with the uncompromising emphasis put on the function of language as the means by which personality, reality, and knowledge are constructed or created.

Out of this conviction about the power of language are developed Barthes' views about reading and writing. He asks about the act of reading, "Has it never happened, as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read, not because you weren't interested, but because you were: because of a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations? In a word, haven't you ever happened to read while looking up from your book?" (*Rustle* 29). Barthes is a staunch advocate of the productive powers of the reader - interacting with the text, playing with the text (as well as playing the text like a musical score), entering the text from personal, cultural, political, and historical experience, traversing the text like a skater on ice drawing configurations and combinations and contours. It is Barthes' objective "to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (*S/Z* 4).

Barthes expounds his view with his characteristic confidence:

> For centuries we have been overly interested in the author and insufficiently in the reader; most critical theories try to explain why the author has written his work, according to which pulsions, which constraints, which limits .... This exorbitant privilege granted to the site the work comes from..., this censorship applied to the site it seeks and where it is dispersed (reading) determine a very special (though an old) economy: the author is regarded as the eternal owner of his work, and the rest of us, his readers, as simple usufructuaries. This economy obviously implies a theme of authority: the author, it is believed, has certain rights over the reader, he constrains him to a certain meaning of the work, and this meaning is of course the right one, the real meaning: whence a critical morality of the right meaning (and of its defect, "misreading"): we try to establish *what the author meant,* and not at all *what the reader understands.* (*Rustle* 30)

How many students have been permanently alienated from the pleasures of reading by classroom experiences where discovering a text's meaning was like playing a game of "I spy with my little eye something red" - a guessing game seeking to be first to name the object in the teacher's mind (or at least in his/her guidebook)? In "The Death of the Author," Barthes observes: "We know now that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)" (*Rustle* 52-53). He recommends that "the text must be treated not as a sacred object..., but essentially as a space of language" and that it is necessary "at every opportunity and at every moment to develop the polysemic reading of the text" (*Rustle* 28).

Asked by an interviewer, "Your new way of perceiving things, of reading between the lines - isn't that highly subversive?", Barthes answers in "A Few Words to Let in Doubt":

> I think it would be very pretentious of me to think that I am subversive. But I would say that, etymologically speaking, yes, I try to subvert. To come up underneath conformity, underneath an existing way of thinking, in order to shift it a little. Not to revolutionize things, but to shake them up a bit. To unstick them, to make them a bit more mobile, to let in doubt. I always try to discomfit what is supposedly natural, what goes without saying. (*Grain* 318)

I like Barthes' understanding of reading as subversive, productive, and playful because, as Bruno Bettelheim reminds us, "we all are much more deeply committed to what we actively shape or reshape than we are to what we accept as offered" (77). For Barthes "the text is plural" and "depends not on an interpretation...but on an explosion, on dissemination" (*Rustle* 59). Nevertheless, Barthes is not promoting unqualified subjective reading of texts:

> The most subjective reading imaginable is never anything but a game played according to certain rules. Where do these rules come from? .... These rules come from an age-old logic of narrative, from a symbolic form which constitutes us even before we are born - in a word, from that vast cultural space through which our person (whether author or reader) is only one passage. (*Rustle* 31)

According to Barthes "the text...solicits from the reader a practical collaboration" (*Rustle* 63).

Out of this understanding of reading Barthes explores the question, "What is there of Desire in reading?", and is convinced that "there is an eroticism of reading" (*Rustle* 38) He proposes that a reader's relation to a book is akin to a mystic's relation to God and a lover's relation to the beloved (*Rustle* 39). Moreover, "in reading, all the body's emotions are present, mingled, coiled up: fascination, emptiness, pain, voluptuousness; reading produces an overwhelmed body" (*Rustle* 39).

Furthermore, Barthes contends that the reader is not only reading a text. He/she is writing the text. Hence, Barthes affirms that it is his "profound and constant conviction ... that it will never be possible to liberate reading if, in the same impulse, we do not liberate writing" (*Rustle* 41). About his book-length reading/writing of a story by Balzac, Barthes notes, "In fact, what I tried to begin in *S/Z* is an identification between the notions of writing and reading: I wanted to 'crush' them into each other.... Both writing and reading should be conceived, worked, defined, and redefined together" (*Grain* 141).

And just as desire is integrally characteristic of reading, desire is characteristic of writing. I know no more cogent advice for the writer than Barthes' proposal in *The Pleasure of the Text* that "the text you write must prove to me that it desires me" (Sontag 405). English educators are too zealously intent on teaching young writers about topic sentences and concluding sentences, about the essential functions of unity, coherence, and emphasis, about the necessity to write complete thoughts in complete sentences, about the obligation to avoid dangling constructions, faulty coordination, double negatives, upside-down subordination, awkward inversion, interrupted movement, indefinite references, run-on sentences, and about the need to be neurotic about comma usage. In other words, students are taken into the workshop at Canadian Tire and taught day after day about the manifold parts of a bicycle (some of them even learn to spell "derailleur") and they make a few efforts at putting the parts together (Bob's bike looks like an ice-cream maker), but they're not allowed to ride a bicycle, not allowed to fall off and get back on again, not allowed to learn to ride a bicycle.

Instead of spending three periods doing exercises explaining run-on and fused sentences, what might happen if students were told to write a text that proves to the reader that it desires him/her? English teachers operate with the underlying and inadequate notions that language is an instrument for transmitting meanings, that language must be transparent and not call attention to itself, that language must be standardized, homogenized, cauterized, that my/your language must be similar to (a copy of) his/her language.

I was years and years overcoming the bad habits instilled in me by well-meaning English Language Arts teachers who drilled me in grammar and writing exercises till I was convinced that I could only turn abruptly to the right and left or march straight ahead. My writing was the feeble mechanical offspring of intercourse with conventions and rules and the teacher's red pencil, of intercourse without desire. And as a teacher I perpetuated the same bad habits for too long - until I began writing with an earnest wish to construct my world and to share my world with others. Then I learned that I had a voice - boisterous and playful, pertinent and germane - a voice filled with desire. And desire seeks its object. Students who write with desire writing filled with desire will write desirable writing.

Recognizing that classrooms are seldom places of pleasure, Barthes recommends that one way to ameliorate the lack of pleasure in classrooms is to give children "the opportunity to create complete objects (which homework assignments cannot be) over a long period of time" (*Grain* 239). Barthes advises that "the pupil must become once again ... a subject who directs his desire, his production, his creation" (*Grain* 239). According to Barthes, the specific role of school is to develop the critical spirit: "We must teach not scepticism but doubt bolstered by *jouissance*. Even better, we must turn to Nietzche, to where he speaks of 'shaking up truth'" (*Grain* 241-242).

Clearly Barthes is not riding the hobby horse galloping toward the enchanted land of competencies and mastery learning and atomistic blocks of knowledge that, when stacked one on top of another, eventually promise a Tower of Babel. He begins with desire - an emotion largely alien in schools except for couples going steady. He is critical of the institution of school - the way it precludes pleasure. In his proposal for improvement involving a call for students to undertake large projects, Barthes is again obviously opposed to the usual practices of school where life is divided

into classes and subjects and time slots and exercises and assignments - fragmentation is necessary for evaluative purposes and evaluation is apparently necessary for schooling.

Another suggestion for ameliorating the lack of pleasure in schools is to expand the notion of what are appropriate texts for interaction in classrooms. As Barthes suggests, "what we should do for these students is give the very idea of literature a good shaking up, we should ask ourselves what literature is" (*Grain* 92). Barthes is convinced that "the text does not stop at (good) literature; it cannot be caught up in a hierarchy" (*Rustle* 58). Instead it is his opinion that "one should read anything at all" (*Grain* 112). Hence, "teaching would be directed toward exploding the literary text as much as possible. The pedagogical problem would be to shake up the notion of the literary text and to make adolescents understand that there is text everywhere" (*Grain* 149). Barthes reads Japanese culture as a text in *Empire of Signs*. Television, billboards, fashion, movies, the cultural space of shopping malls, videos, automobiles, the architecture of fast-food restaurants, all demand to be read as texts.

For too long schools have been devoted to a narrow view of literature - those texts that are labelled classics, and for too long students have been compelled to twist their mouths and minds into convoluted shapes trying to read texts for which they have no desire. And it doesn't work. I am not, however, suggesting that students cannot receive pleasure from the classics. I once took a big class of under-achieving adolescents who had consistently yawned through my literature classes to see *Twelfth Night* performed by a travelling troupe from London. The pleasure was abundant for all of us. Students can enjoy the classics. (For months during high school I consistently stayed up till two or three in the morning reading George Eliot.) Nevertheless, students should not be fed the classics like cod liver oil. Students need opportunities to read widely, to read with desire those texts that provide pleasure for them. This might mean *Popular Mechanix* (W. H. Auden enjoyed popular journals of science), romances, comic books (James Joyce read them voraciously), Agatha Christie mysteries, bestsellers by Collins, Steele, King, and Grisham, *Seventeen*, *The Globe and Mail* business section.

Obviously I am not recommending that students' reading be restricted to the popular culture. Young people need wide exposure to a variety of genres, modes, themes, literary styles, historical periods, national literatures. But how are they going to acquire that wide exposure? Hardly in the typical classroom where a dozen stories might be taught in a year. At that rate a student might have exposure to six dozen stories in his/her high school experience - he/she has caught only a glimmer of a star in a creation where millions shine brightly. So, students need opportunities and encouragement to read widely, and above all they need the kinds of experiences with language in school that will motivate them for active and productive language experiences out of school.

I promised no more than a nibble of Barthes, and I would be surprised if my brief introduction to his ideas receives more than the tentative affirmation of curiosity and piqued interest. Above all, Barthes reminds me that students and teachers need opportunities to revel in words, to construct their worlds in language, to know "the pleasure of the text," to experience the joy and power of language. But Barthes is only one of many invigorating and innovative voices currently available to English Language Arts educators - voices which remain still largely unknown

to English teachers; theoretical and practical voices which hold the promise of refurbishing English Language Arts education. Those voices deserve listening, and above all examination and reflection. To that goal more of us involved in English Language Arts education need to turn our attention.

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Minimal Assignments and Outside Respondents:

More on the "Learning from Text" Project

We participants in the "Learning from Text" project are flattered to find that our interim report (*Inkshed* 12.1) has been used as discussion material in a course on Language and Learning Across the Curriculum (*Inkshed* 12:2). One of our many goals is to provoke discussion about writing and responding to writing in disciplinary areas, and we take this quick and thoughtful feedback as a good sign.

Myrna Hynes, Judy Kalman, and Miriam Horne each propose useful suggestions and criticisms. An overriding theme is discomfort with the writing task we selected and the ways in which the Education students responded to it. We share some of this discomfort, and would like to clarify the compromises we have made, why we have made them, what we think we have learned in the first phase of the project, and how we are applying those insights to the second phase.

The main criticism is that a summary assignment is too simplistic, too mechanical to be very useful. We agree that writing a summary is about as far down Bloom's taxonomy as one can get, and that other forms of writing would have provoked more engagement with the original texts and the concepts contained in them. Our phrase "immersing students in a

communication-rich environment" was perhaps too hyperbolic; "dipping their toes in a communication-rich environment" might have been more apt.

Assigning a summary was partly strategic, as we saw it as an easy form of text for the Psychology students to produce and for the Education students to evaluate. The Education students, though familiar with the basics of psychology, are not really part of the conversation of that discipline or of the Psychology 205 class. We therefore felt that the fairest assignment would be one whose content-area accuracy could be assessed by any intelligent reader who could compare the summaries with the original texts. This would reduce the chance that the writers would dismiss the respondents' comments because they were"outsiders."

In fact, some of the Psychology 205 students initially expressed reservations about being marked by outsiders, but in the final survey only one of over 150 students complained about the markers ("I know my writing skills and do not need to have them evaluated by a third- or fourth-year education student").

But expedience is a weak reason for choosing an assignment, and there were other reasons for us to ask for a summary. Miriam Horne is right that a clever student can sometimes produce an acceptable summary without entering into a true "conversation" with the text. However, the *Inkshed* tradition of valuing social knowledge should not blind us to the fact that such conversations involve many skills, some seemingly mundane. The act of reading a text, processing its language into concepts, and producing prose that embodies those concepts is both a meaningful and a difficult task. To perform it well, a student must have read the text closely enough to understand its balance. She must know what the key words, headings and rhetorical structure are. To determine the main points, she must read the minor points and understand enough of what the text is saying to understand that they are minor.

These skills are in fact the skills of active reading, skills which are integral to the social knowledge involved in writing. They are skills in which all of us experienced writers engage as we deal with academic discourse. (How many of you readers are skimming this article right now for the key words and main points so that you can grasp its significance quickly before you miss the elevator? Where did you learn to do that?) "True response logs," we feel, would have given them a much *different* reading/writing experience, but not necessarily a *better* one.

We also learned a great deal ourselves about how summary assignments work. One of the texts we chose turned out in hindsight to be a great deal easier to summarize than the other, because of its clear rhetorical structure,. In fact, it was so easy to summarize that some students ventured beyond summary to such a close reproduction of the original that they were charged with plagiarism. As you might expect, this produced a lively discussion as to what plagiarism is, how much of the blame should be placed on the students' indolence and how much on the structure of the assignment, and what to do about it in future. In the process we learned much about our own expectations as conditioned by our own personal and disciplinary stances. Since the project was intended to be a learning experience for ourselves as much as for the students, we have to count that as a bonus.

Other *Inkshed* comments centre on the amount of writing and the way it was evaluated. As to the amount of writing, expedience is our only plea. Weekly or daily writing would obviously have been more beneficial, and we are intrigued by Judy Kalman's suggestions as to how this may be accomplished. But we felt that the Education students, who had many things to do other than participate in this project, could not be asked to mark more than two pieces of writing without jeopardizing their other work.

As to *how* they marked, we can perhaps be more helpful. They marked in pairs, keeping their own response logs which will eventually become the basis of a more extended response to the experience. True, the marking guides smell vaguely like report cards. However, we intended the scales to be prompts that would direct the respondents' attention to specific aspects of the texts, not total substitutes for discursive response, and in fact most respondents wrote comments as well as checking off the boxes. The relatively minimal nature of these responses was intentional: we wanted to investigate practical ways of maintaining a communicative environment in the real world of enormous classes in which such minimal response may be the only response possible.

Our preliminary results suggest that this minimal response is not only better than nothing but actively helpful. As we expected, the overall quality of students' writing did not change significantly from the first to the second assignment: writing skills require a great deal more time and response to show improvement. But we were after long-term attitude shift, not just short-term improvement in measurable skills. We wanted to find ways of keeping students engaged with writing and aware that it has a place in learning, even in an environment increasingly characterised by large classes and multiple-choice tests.

Finally, Myrna Hymes questions the role of the multiple-choice test. We did not intend our minimalist writing assignments to *circumvent* the multiple-choice test but rather to *augment* it. The participants in this study vary in their degree of tolerance for multiple-choice testing, but they are agreed that multiple means of learning and multiple means of assessment are better than single means. We had no intention of determining the success of the enterprise by a few questions on the final exam: the kind of learning that can be measured by such an exam was only one dimension of learning in which we were interested. Rather, we were interested in learning whether, *along with* helping them keep engaged with writing, the brief written assignments would help students retain more basic data about the field of psychology.

So how did we do? Our attempts to measure attitude shift empirically yielded decidedly mixed results. For instance, 80.8% of the class which received writing assignments responded "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the statement "I find that writing helps me learn more from my text," compared to 69.1% of a control group which did not receive writing assignments. On the other hand, 62% of the control group agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I find that writing is a useful way of learning new information," compared with 60.3% of the treatment group.

Well, anyone who cannot handle contradictory results ought to stay away from data-gathering. "The heavens do not fall for such a trifle," as Conrad's Marlow points out. The results of the data-retention study were much more heartening. The final exam contained two multiple-choice items related to the information the students summarized. Sixty percent (60%) of the treatment

group answered one of the multiple-choice items correctly, as opposed to 48% of the control group; on the other item, the scores were 48% correct as opposed to 29%. The conclusion that students remember material better after having written about it is hardly surprising, but it is gratifying to find one's common-sense wisdom backed up by numbers. Such figures may carry a great deal of rhetorical weight when we report our results to our colleagues outside the discipline of composition studies.

Ultimately, though, the quantitative studies are gravy. We see the project primarily as students interacting with students, not as treatments interacting with experimental groups. We are far more interested in students' narrative comments than in their quantified responses. A few of these comments were rather left-handed compliments: "The writing assignments do not require a huge amount of time and they helped me to raise my mark." Others were downright heartwarming: "The marker who marked the assignment was very helpful to me because she really took time to explain to me how I should write in order to improve on the 2nd essay." Overall, 27 out of 29 comments suggested that the writing was worth the extra work.

The Education students were also very positive about the experience. When they went on their first practicum and experienced for the first time the immense loneliness of the kitchen table stacked with marking at 3:00 am, they at least had had the experience once before in a collaborative environment. (In our engagement with the social aspects of writing, we sometimes forget the social aspects of marking.)

Finally, we want to emphasize the evolving nature of the project. We are fortunate in having a two-semester class of Education students paired with one-semester Psychology students. This means that the same group of Education students can try their marking skills on a new group of Psychology students. This term we are working with a third-year rather than a first-year Psychology class, though still a large one. We are using a more complex assignment and introducing formal multiple drafting into the writing process. The Education students commented on the first draft of the assignment, which was returned to the students for rewriting and final marking by the course instructor (Jane Raymond).

One question is whether problems will be caused by switching audiences between drafts. This form of audience-switching happens all the time in real life (as when we show a draft to colleagues before sending it to a journal editor). We want to know more about its effects both on the quality of the writing and the anxiety level of the writer when it happens to students who are used to doing all of their writing for one audience (the teacher). We have not yet surveyed the Psych 369 students on this question, but informally we feel that the experiment was successful. The students made a large number of positive changes in their second drafts in response to the Education students' comments, and Jane reports that the papers are among the best she's read.

All in all, we are asking more questions than we will probably be able to answer, and the project will have generated many more by the time it is complete. But that is the idea, and that is why the teachers and potential teachers who must deal with these questions are at the centre of the exercise, not left out as Miriam Horne fears. As we mentioned at the beginning of this piece,

one of our most important goals is to start a conversation in our own institution about the place of writing in the disciplines, a conversation that we hope will continue long after our surveys and statistics have yellowed in the filing cabinet.

One of the Psych 205 students probably said it best on her survey: "I appreciated the suggestions for improvement. It is also really great to see a cooperative effort between the Psychology Department and the Faculty of Education in this project. I believe it has been beneficial for both groups involved." How could we have said it better?

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