

Collaborative Writing about Collaborative Writing

Betsy Sargent ✍

Fifteen years ago, James Reither and Douglas Vipond published an essay in *College English* entitled "Writing as Collaboration." Even though, as those of us in Inkshed know, Russ Hunt has carried on this tradition of dialogical and collaborative learning at St. Thomas University after Jim Reither's retirement and even though many of us take such student-centered classrooms for granted at our own institutions, we're well aware that not everyone teaches this way—that not everyone incorporates writing-to-learn into their teaching of other subjects, let alone into their teaching of writing itself.

What took me a bit by surprise, however, was to realize that undergraduates in the education program at University of Alberta found Reither and Vipond's ideas startling, as if they had just been published yesterday. My primary contact with students in the education program at University of Alberta is through a course I teach occasionally, English 299, Essay Writing for Education Students, a course in which only education students can enroll. I teach it focusing on two things—their own writing and their future teaching of writing, since most of them will be teaching or evaluating writing in one form or another. While these students have made it clear that the chance in my class to do so much ungraded writing was a new practice for them, as was the requirement that they read and respond to each other's writing, I have nevertheless assumed that in the education program, they would have been exposed much more often to group work and ideas about student-centered teaching and learning than students in most other programs of study would have been. The inksheds I have read from these students this term on Reither and Vipond's influential 1989 essay now make me think otherwise—or that, at least, if they *have* had any experiences with collaborative learning, these experiences have made them even more negative about the possibilities of group work in their own future classes than they might have been otherwise. (The ones who had not yet experienced any form of collaborative learning themselves seemed much more enthusiastic about trying it than those who had.)

At any rate, this fall term, in a class incorporating many of the features of collaborative learning and writing that Reither and Vipond describe in their piece, I asked these future K-12 teachers to read and inkshed about quite a few essays on composition theory, including an excerpt from "Writing as Collaboration" itself (the part they did not read was the long description of Reither and Vipond working on an academic article together). The students had been working in four groups (of five students each) since the beginning of term, roughly two months, by the time they read and wrote about Reither and Vipond's piece. My 299 evening class met for three hours once a week; students wrote an inkshed every week in response to an assigned reading (the weekly inksheds were required, but ungraded). When they got to class Wednesday nights, they gave that inkshed to the person in their group whose turn it was to do the next inkshed report (see the form below that Kevin used to complete his report on Reither and Vipond). That person would take possession of all inksheds, including his/her own, in order to write marginal comments on each inkshed and to complete the inkshed report, which was due—with all inksheds attached—the following week.

Some students complete inksheds and inkshed reports on computer; some don't. But the inksheds

are my way of ensuring that everyone is participating in the conversation that's going on about the assigned readings and also of ensuring that I read roughly the same amount from every student during the term. I love reading through the written conversations that Russ Hunt's students are having online as part of his classes, but every time I do read them, I simultaneously worry about a few things:

1. How would I keep up? There's a huge amount written by these enthusiastic students and I'm a slow reader. I could go to sleep thinking I'd read the latest installment in my class's ongoing online conversation and wake up to discover that some of them had been at it all night! I don't want to keep up in order to control or limit the conversation, but I'd feel a bit anxious not at least knowing what had most recently been on the minds of some of my students vis a vis the readings and the investigation going on in the class.
2. How do I ensure that everyone gets equal air time? The online discussions are lively and important, but they seem to me to present some of the same problems that in-class discussions often do—a few bold and talkative people can take up most of the online space just as easily as they can take up most of a class period. The class then focuses on what those few students want to focus on. Online discussions do at least allow several threads to be carried on simultaneously, but it's still possible for quiet students to remain countries that aren't heard from (or at least, not much).

At least with the inksheds and inksheds reports handled in the old-fashioned way, on paper, I know I'm seeing an equal amount of writing from each student each week. I can't read and comment on all of it, of course, but since students are always receiving marginal comments from others in their group, they don't feel that their written thoughts ever go unread. I tell students that I will always read the inkshed report, the marginal comments, and the inkshed written by the report writer that week—which also must have marginal comments on it (I require them to write marginalia on *their own* inksheds as well, *after* they have read and commented on everyone else's, as if they were another person—which I argue they *are*, after reading how four other people responded to the same reading assignment). Since group members take turns doing the inkshed report, each member usually ends up doing it twice each term.

The advantages, to me at least, are these:

1. I have a manageable and predictable amount of inkshedding to read each week (nothing prevents my students from setting up and carrying on their own online conversation outside of class—but if they do, it's a conversation belonging entirely to them);
2. I read roughly the same amount of inkshedding from each student over the course of the term, and I get to read each student's first thoughts in reaction to the reading assignment, thoughts not yet influenced or excluded by the interests or reactions of others in the class (Anthony Paré, in Russ Hunt's piece "What is Inkshedding," talks about the problem created when the direction of in-class conversations is determined by the first few people bold enough to speak).

The inksheds reproduced below come from one of these four groups, group #3, which had a particularly lively discussion on paper in early November about Reither and Vipond's ideas. It was Kevin Tokarsky's turn to read all the inksheds for group #3 that week and to submit an inkshed

report (see below); he was also required to write comments in the margins of each inkshed, including his own. This batch includes inksheds by Carla, Amanda, Francis, Mary and Kevin. By chance, most of the students in group #3 had done their inksheds on computer that week, and they agreed to send them to me via e-mail (the one student who had handwritten her piece gave me her copy so I could type it up to submit to the *Inkshed Newsletter*). Then I typed Kevin's handwritten comments in the margin so they would be readable. The students usually draw arrows to identify the passages that they're responding to (they often also underline the passages that have the most energy for them, a practice we refer to as "pointing" and that Amanda mentions in her inkshed below). Since I don't know how to draw arrows on a computer, I've put the text comment box as close to the text being responded to as possible; I've also underlined the passage and highlighted it in yellow.

The students were given two specific inkshed prompts, although they always have the option of inkshedding about something else in the reading if the suggested prompt doesn't work for them. This time, however, most of the students chose the same prompt (see below); however, there was little unanimity in their responses, which ranged from angry to enthusiastic. What always fascinates me in energetic student inkshedding is the way in which I get a glimpse into students' thinking and feeling, glimpses I would never get in any other way, especially once we've reached a point in the term when they trust that they are free to speak their minds and that they won't be secretly marked down as a result. I can't imagine, now, teaching without knowing that these strong and varied reactions are going on. I'm also struck by how effectively students react to each other's ideas and by how often a student has to vent (in the relative safety of an inkshed) before he or she can become receptive to a new idea.

I have reproduced these inksheds with only light editing (they are freewritten, after all, so they had the occasional missing word or repeated word) and without my own marginal comments. I've also placed Kevin's inkshed report first, although readers can obviously do what I sometimes do myself—read through the individual inksheds and all marginalia first, saving the inkshed report itself for last (it depends how much time I have). If I read the inkshed report first, it sometimes directs me to specific passages or inksheds or makes me curious about others, so—if I have time—I can end up reading inksheds in addition to the one by the report writer. In this particular case, I quickly got sucked into the conversation that was going on and read them all.

I thought Kevin did a fine job referring members of his group to each other for confirmation or contradiction. And I certainly thought his own comments in the margins of Francis's fuming inkshed were more useful than my own comments, especially since they highlighted the fact that Francis was railing against collaborative work *while participating in it* (and participating in it fully and effectively throughout the term, I might add). These responses seem to reveal the effects of bad experiences with group work in the past; they also reveal genuine concern with how collaborative learning can work K-12, especially in Alberta when so many high school teachers feel the pressure to teach to the exams (and certainly the extensive assessment practices in Alberta are unlikely to change after the extraordinary OECD [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development] test results released this week ranking Alberta 15-year-olds among the brightest in the world). My 299 students are eager for any insights Inkshed readers might have about how the kind of collaborative learning Reither and Vipond describe can work not just in university classrooms, but K-12.

The inkshed prompts:

Only one student (Mary) chose the prompt asking for a quick summary of Janet Emig's ideas and for speculation on how those ideas might have influenced Reither and Vipond's methods. The inkshed prompt that the other students took off from was as follows:

Reither and Vipond organize their classes around a crucial research question that everyone works to explore together throughout the term. Use your 15-20 minutes of nonstop inkshedding to brainstorm a few questions about writing or the teaching of writing that you think are important, questions that have come to you from the readings, questions you might be interested in exploring further. Pick one of your research questions to focus on and sketch all the ways you can think of for conducting this inquiry: describe in as much detail as possible the kinds of interviews, surveys, experiments, library research, or web research you might carry out. Your instructor may ask everyone to pool their research ideas in order to arrive at a few common class goals for inquiry during the term.

The five inksheds following Kevin's inkshed report are as follows: Carla's (attempting a judicious reflection on possibilities and problems with collaborative work, especially problems with assessment), Amanda's (enthusiastically outlining a way to use R & V's ideas to teach the circulatory system); Francis's (angrily denouncing collaborative writing and learning and praising the explicit writing instruction he had in high school); Mary's (focusing on Emig's ideas about writing-to-learn); and Kevin's (trying to make connections between the collaborative work he's done in the theatre and R & V's ideas).

I n k s h e d r e p o r t

<p>Do this inkshed report quickly but thoughtfully—most of your time should be invested in reading your classmates’ inksheds and commenting on them. I look through all the inksheds for signs of a real conversation going on in the margins.</p>	<p>Date: Nov 7/04</p>
	<p>Your name & Group #: 3 Kevin Tokarsky</p>
	<p>Topic/Title: Reither and Vipond response</p>
<p>Responses submitted after report written: None</p>	
<p>Missing Responses: None.</p>	
<p>Most eloquent or humorous sentence(s)—copy them here and name the inkshed author(s): “Reading works of published authors has certain influences on writing. But NOT reading works of classmates!” Francis</p>	
<p>Sentence(s) that surprised me the most or pointed out ideas or connections I hadn’t thought of—copy them here and name the inkshed author(s): “Writing is CREATING and ORIGINATING a unique verbal construct that is graphically recorded (Emig)—so it’s a super powerful way of learning.” --Mary.</p>	
<p>Wierdest or most puzzling ideas—copy them here and name the inkshed author(s): Francis-- His contention that writing is a strictly private endeavor and not to be subjected to change by the influence of others. Mary-- “Writing helps all learners learn better.” Really? All?</p>	
<p>A question that should be addressed for class discussion—if this came from one or more of the inksheds, name the author(s): The problem of assessment in Vipond and Reither’s method. Is it do-able in our present school system? Carla, Kevin, Francis.</p>	
<p>Sentences or passages that confused me or revealed confusion: no need to copy these in full—mark them on the inkshed(s) with brackets and question marks and refer me to the inkshed(s) in question. “To research Reither and Vipond’s method, I would incorporate two separate formats: one for effort and one for the end product and then see which is more appropriate for their students’ work—effort or product.” but Carla said we couldn’t assess effort?</p>	
<p>A detailed, helpful summary written by: Carla, Amanda</p>	
<p>Interesting reading/writing strategies tried by (describe or name the strategy): Francis’ emphatic rant style (See summary below for further elaboration)</p>	
<p>A key term used as a way into the text by (state the term used): Inquiry, student-based model. Carla.</p>	
<p>Summary, comments, or reflections (inkshed for a few minutes and continue on the back of this sheet if you need to): Hooboy, this topic provoked a lot of different reactions; Amanda embraced the idea; Carla, Mary and Kevin seemed guarded in their approval; Francis, well he was just mad. I found Francis’s reaction fascinating, as this topic obviously hit a button with him. What was so interesting was how I feel his anger clouded his reasoning. I suspect that if he were to look at his argument when not so steamed, he would admit that he really didn’t mean some of the stuff he said. I’ve been known to go on a rant or two in my time and I found it fascinating to be on the other side. As the reader, it’s very easy to sit back and pull apart the argument. As the writer, while it may feel like you are expressing your point strongly, you should be aware that anger can cloud your reasoning and make your case weaker: that’s it—a strongly worded, weak argument. Fascinating. I also noticed that the writing in general was much better in these inksheds than in the first ones that I reported on. The pieces were more focused on the readings and the arguments better thought out and this lent strength to the writing. There is a higher level of comfort in the form I guess. Perhaps the most value I have found in this reporting is finding my comfort level in commenting on them. My first go round was a bit of a strenuous, laborious process. This time, however, I was happily tucked up in my comfy chair, casually reading through the pieces and making my little comments. This ease with reading other people’s work and making comments is gonna be invaluable once I get in the school system.</p>	

(Nothing you say in this report influences anyone else’s grade, only your own – unless, of course, your group has put you in the unfair position of needing to write a report without all the inksheds present.)

**Inkshed 8--In response to Reither and Vipond's "Writing as Collaboration":
How I would implement such a model in the classroom? Carla Boschman, Nov 1,
2004**

Reither and Vipond's progressive idea of writing as a collaborative process is interesting and worthwhile due to its ambitious goal to allow students to teach themselves by an inquiry, student-based model. I believe the student-based model is effective at a university level or upper levels of high school but not at the jr. high or lower levels of high school--if the research project is the sole curriculum of the course. I believe there has to a balance between student-based projects and teacher-based instruction at the lower levels of education (jr. high and some high school classes). I respect the premise of the student-based inquiry model, where students research and teach themselves what scholars discuss in certain fields and then collaborate with others in their research and generate their own final body of research; there is a lot to be gained in this type of learning. But I believe there are some problems in Reither and Vipond's model if a teacher is to implement this research model in the classroom as the sole project of the class.

Indeed, Elbow and Bartholomae seem to be discussing the same problem--so you're in good company.

In response to the question of teaching of writing, I would wonder how students learn best: solely by this inquiry-, student-based model or by a teacher-based model or by a balance of the two. If I were to study this question, I would research this firsthand by observing my students--whether they gained more understanding and learning through research and inquiry or through teacher-based lectures, work books, and individual work.

Absolutely the best way to gain the knowledge. But will we as high school teachers have the time and luxury to use our classrooms for this type of research? I hope so, but I worry that the curricular demands and narental demands mav not leave us with this option.

Thank you for bringing up personalities and human nature. This seems to me to be a gaping hole in R & V's theory.

I wonder if Reither and Vipond's model is too idealistic in its ambitions in an actual classroom setting. First of all, group projects are great for the popular child, or the extrovert, or the student who is socially capable, easily able to verbalize, socialize, and work with others. But

what of the introvert shy child who cannot vocalize their opinions and finds it hard to work with others? If a collaborative research project is the only project the shy introvert student is involved with for the duration of the course, then that particular student is discriminated against due to their abilities or nature. Education psychology has mapped out 7 to 9 "intelligences" of students: kinesthetic, spatial etc, and I wonder if the collaborative model would exclude some students who are introverted and do not work well with others collaboratively. Granted, opportunities like collaborative research will provide necessary learning opportunities for introverted students to grow and become more capable of working with others--which is of course an important skill to learn. I wonder, though, if the entirety of the course is based on collaborative work, maybe an unbalanced scale weighing toward extroverts is created.

You just brought up the same issue I did in my inkshed! Great minds, hey?

Also, according to Reither and Vipond's models, students will ideally put equal amounts of work into their project and research and contribute to the maximum of their capabilities. In the real world we know that some students do the majority of the work while others sit back and ride on the others' coat tails. Reither and Vipond perhaps address this in their assessment scheme, where students assess each other and also the teacher assesses students according to effort--so that those who put in more effort are marked accordingly. But, marking for effort creates another issue because teachers cannot or should not mark for effort. Having taken an assessment course at the University, I learnt that the number one factor teachers cannot assess for is effort! How can we put a quantitative mark on such a subjective or qualitative and elusive thing as effort? What of the students who procrastinate and finish their research the last week it is due and produce amazing products versus students who diligently work on their research but do not produce a brilliant body of work--who receives the better mark? Subjective and relative marking is produced when teachers mark for effort, so I believe Reither and Vipond's assessment for the research model is faulty.

Yes, some form of accountability and interdependence for the group is required. You should read Amanda's inkshed!

Absolutely—the system is not set up this way.

Although we as students get marked subjectively all the time!

But! according to your above argument, you can't mark on effort.

How do you decide?

But accurately and eloquently I think!

So is it only an issue of assessment?

Is it also the teacher's responsibility to help ensure the success of the group's efforts? To be a guide?

Absolutely! It seems to me the biggest problem these days is too much info being available. Learning to be discriminating is THE skill!

To answer this problem as a teacher in response to the best model of assessment, I would use both student assessment of peers and also teacher assessment. To research Reither and Vipond's method, I would also incorporate two separate formats: one for effort and one for the end product and then see which is more appropriate for the students' work--effort or product.

Having criticized Reither and Vipond's model of collaborative research so vehemently, I actually do believe that such a model is one of the best ways to learn--if the students have accessibility to good resources. There is nothing more frustrating than having a research assignment and feeling unable to find appropriate information. I believe that it is the teacher's responsibility to be sure there are enough resources for students to research their topics at the library or to have internet accessibility for all students--which can be unrealistic at some schools. So the amount of resources would have to be addressed. Also it would be interesting to observe how important resources are to the students' end product--whether books, articles, and journals that are tactile and found in libraries are better or whether internet sources such as journals are better--knowing that a lot of junk can be found on the internet and some students do not have the discerning capabilities at the lower levels of education.

In review: to research whether the Vipond and Reither model of research would work, I would study whether student-based inquiry models of learning are more effective than teacher-based models of learning such as lectures and individual work.

2. I would study and research the "intelligences" of the students in my class and determine if they are conducive to the collaborative working model as the sole project for the class.
3. I would test assessment methods by using both peer assessment of end products of work and also of effort. I would assess the students using the same rubric the students use. I would then judge if the students' evaluation is appropriate and determine if effort can be marked in relation to the product of the students' work.

4. I would look at how available resources affected the research, at whether the resources at the school were effective or if other resources had to be found such as internet databases.

Kevin's final comments: Carla, I truly appreciate your taking into account the individuality of the students. I think, too often, as teachers or researchers about education we lump students into one big group hoping for the magic formula that will work for all of them. You're also right that assessment is a huge issue. Our system is based on certain types of assessment and as educators what is our role within that system? Do we need to work with it as it is or work towards changing it so that our students can benefit? I suspect this will be an ongoing issue. In regards to group work/learning, I'm not convinced of its efficacy. Remember our IPP? Even though we worked as a group and delegated responsibilities, I spent more time on that project than on any other during that term and in the end our results were disappointing both in how we were assessed and also in what I learned and took away from the project. I like your ideas on observation of the whole group learning issue.

Amanda Cardinal Ludwig—Reither/Vipond, Inkshedding Prompt #8, Nov. 3, 2004

[Questions about writing or the teaching of writing that you think are important, questions that have come to you from the readings in this chapter, questions you might be interested in exploring further.]

Interesting—I certainly don't remember writing essays or using writing as a mode of understanding in any science class I ever took.

1. How can students become more confident in their writing?
2. What skills do you as a student think you need in order to be a good writer? Do you have these skills? How could you acquire these skills?
3. How can inkshedding be incorporated into a biology class to help further understand a topic? For example, the circulatory system.
4. How can inkshedding be used as a tool to help students come up with a topic for a short story, poem, or essay?

How can inkshedding be used as a tool to help students come up with a topic for a biology essay?

Would you encourage them to use other sources as well?

This raises an issue about R & V's method. How are students held accountable that they do the required work? And if all members of the group don't do it, do the others suffer by not

The topic for a group of students would be, for example, the circulatory system. Each student would be asked to take a part of the system to write about. This information would be gotten from the text book. For example, one student could research the heart, another how the blood exchanges wastes for oxygen and nutrients, another on what veins are and their purpose, another on what capillaries are and their purpose, another on diseases of the circulatory system like high cholesterol, heart disease, and pacemakers. The goal is to get each student to work on a separate piece, and in reading each other's work, they will begin to learn how each part of the system is related and how it all functions together.

Okay, you answered my question from the previous paragraph. By constantly sharing, it will soon come to light if they're not doing all the work. Good!

I wish I shared your excitement about biology!

How great to be able to research stuff that you

I really liked Reither and Vipond's idea of co-authoring. The students could each inkshed on a topic of their choice, using what knowledge they have of the topic or what they would like to find out. Next, the students could share their inksheds with other members of their group who would point to sentences that really made an impact on them. Each student would then take the inkshed back and write a rough draft of an essay focusing on the pointing done by their group mates. The writing would be shared again, and again pointed. In this process, a student would be able to learn how to pick out key/important/jaw-dropping/ influential/ fascinating passages on another student's paper, and to recognize them in his/her own writing. As well, information that the student does not know or wants to include based on the inkshed feed back will be researched.

Hey, you did it again—my first question answered. Thanks.

What happens if members of the group disagree on what is interesting or relevant? Is there some sort of guide, mediator, moderator?

Good, good—more accountability. They become interdependent, a key factor in group learning.

Can I come to the class?! I'm pretty much in the dark about the circulatory

Research can be done using the text book for the class, watching a documentary about the topic, reading articles about the topic in magazines or encyclopedias, looking through journal articles and additional books at the library, and surfing the internet. The new information would again be freewritten and presented to the group. The group would sift through the information, pointing out what is useful, what is interesting and needs more information, and what is not useful or relevant to the topic.

Students would then have all the information they need to write their piece on the circulatory system. Next, the group would present the circulatory system to the class. The students would also need to find pictures and other illustrations on their topic, but they could help each other.

In this way, all of the students would understand the circulatory system. They would also learn how to sift through the information that they have compiled from prior knowledge or research, and how to organize and present it so others will understand it.

This idea needs a lot of work. ☺

I dunno—it seems to me that you've got a pretty good handle on the idea already. I suspect if you tried it out with a class, you'd find any little problems and deal with them without any problem. I really like where you're going with this, Amanda. By making the students write out and *read* to their fellow group and class mates what they are supposed to have covered, you are making sure that they are actually able to explain what they have learned. And, as Einstein said, if you can't explain a concept to your ninety-year-old grandmother, then you don't really understand it. My only question would be, where does the teacher fit in? What is your role? How hands-on/ hands-off are you?
Kevin Tokarsky

Amanda's postscript:

I think that this form of teaching a class is a great way to get students motivated to write. Students get to experience firsthand being the knowledge-givers, the researchers, the proof-readers, the feedback-givers, the teachers. Students can feel, not power, but well, control over what they are doing and how to do it, based on their groups of peers. Students get to learn how to write not by getting told how to do it, but by learning how to do it from practice. There is no possibility of not understanding what the teacher wants, because the students are the teachers.

The final document might not be an essay, but maybe a poster detailing the functions, disorders, pictures, structures of each system studied. There have to be ways to motivate students to research and write about a topic--they must own their work. If students feel they are involved in something bigger, feel they have something to contribute to someone

who also wants or needs to know, then perhaps they will want to get this information out to those people. Doing one project, or several mini-projects as I have suggested, gets students to contribute to a small knowledge community where their ideas and knowledge need to be heard, expressed, and written about.

Francis Tymchuk—Reither/Vipond Inkshed, Nov. 3, 2004

It certainly is that time of the term!

That is definitely blunt!

Me, I need the stress or I might never get anything

But *not* R & V, I would hazard a guess!

Oh my, I'm a little worried about handing you my inksheds now.

I suspect R & V would want you to do a little more research on the method before using it in the classroom. Maybe their article would spark your interest and make you want to learn more?

Yes, the problem of assessment definitely exists in the school system.

Wow, what great inkshed prompts. Not. It's probably **because I'm stressed over everything** that I just can't get into this inkshed due for our upcoming class. Oh well, I'm not worried, that's the way it goes sometimes. But yeah, I guess what needs to be done needs to be done. But yeah, to put it bluntly, I think that **what Reither and Vipond wrote was garbage. Absolutely horrible.** Because writing is not just collaborating with each other...**writing is INDIVIDUAL.** If a person wants to write their own piece, they will not be able to do so as effectively if they have to collaborate on one overall unifying topic that the entire group works on. I will NEVER teach English this way. In high school I did a fair bit of inkshedding, especially in Grade 12, although I never called it by that name. My high school classmates and I all liked the notion of working individually and coming up with a final product that is *all our own*. Not some joint group effort. I hate group work. It absolutely disgusts me. I can write essays so much better if it's on my own time, not being forced to meet deadlines or worrying about letting the group down. If it's all individual than **there is no extra stress of letting the group down.** Reither and Vipond say that "[Students] learn that writing and knowing consist in using and building on others' writing and knowing." Oh, definitely, **reading works of published authors has certain influences on writing. But NOT reading works of classmates!** I do not copy the style of another writer...my style is my own.

So what are questions that I can think of on writing or the teaching of writing that I think are important? Maybe one could be "Why should collaborative writing be used?" Or how about, after reading the piece by Vipond and Reither, **"Why would I, after only reading this one essay explaining the technique, agree to teach an English class in the collaborative way that is explained in this essay?"** Why would I WANT to force students to work together for an entire semester and not grade individual pieces of writing that they do throughout the semester?" **Because I'm sure that Vipond and Reither's proposal would work great for diploma writing. Not.** They say in their essay that "the instructor does not attempt to teach research or writing skills explicitly." Oh, that's absolutely marvelous. So that when the students get into a diploma setting, they realize that they don't know

the technique on how to write. My High School English teacher taught our class a very general method for writing essays that was very effective for people that were not great in English. Once we wrote a few papers for him, he could see where our style and techniques for writing lie, and throughout the rest of the semester he would give comments to each individual person in class on how to improve this style and technique. You see, he DID **ATTEMPT TO TEACH WRITING SKILLS EXPLICITLY**. And, as my ENTIRE English 30 class would agree, it WORKED. After seeing the way he taught, there is absolutely NO WAY I can take the garbage that “the instructor does not attempt to teach research or writing skills explicitly.” Some writers (like me) do not like collaborating on everything. **Writing for me generally has some personal aspect to it, and I do not usually like to divulge what I write to everybody else. It’s invading on MY PRIVACY.** And I do not like it. Vipond and Reither also say that “Our most powerful motive for writing is to change and be changed by others with whom we would identify.” **So, if I identify with someone in our English 299 class, I have to change my writing for them???? Hell no!** Another essay topic could easily be to disagree with everything that Vipond and Reither say in their essay and write on “Why should teachers work with their students to teach them writing skills explicitly, and to have them develop their skills individually, and not through joint collaboration?”

I’m pretty sure R & V aren’t saying you can’t write private material as well.

Francis, Well, even though I’m only a classmate of yours, I will give you my two cents worth. I’m not the world’s biggest proponent of group work either. In fact, several of the group projects that I have worked on have taken longer, been far less valuable educationally, and been some of the work I have been least proud of. Too often, I think it’s more of a time-saving or labour-saving device for the teachers, and they do not set the groups up for success. This being said, I’m not convinced that there is nothing to learn from other people—be they published authors or not. We are affected by people every day—implicitly or explicitly—and surely that must carry over into our thought processes and hence our writing. My favourite passage in our text is the one by Margaret Atwood about who she writes for. It’s worth a reread or a first look, if you missed it earlier. Kevin.

p.s. I’m sure you must have enjoyed Batholomae’s essay when he talks about the desire among some educators to treat school as if it isn’t school.

True—but does it have other functions as well?

That's great that it works so well for you. However, you should look at Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and see what he has to say

Utilizing more than one part of the brain. I like

This is certainly what R & V think makes it such a good way of

Yeah, we do this all the time, don't we? Whether it's from reading something, hearing it, seeing it. We record it and then build on it.

You should read Francis's inkshed—he

But aren't you building on your *aunt's* knowing

There, you answered my question--thanks!

Emig's ideas about writing are straightforward and clear. I agree with what she says. I truly know (I speak from personal experience) that **writing is a way of figuring out the world, what we think and know.**

I will write stories or journal entries when my brain is feeling cluttered, so it's good to get it out. Writing involves both thought processes and a **"visible graphic product."** It basically is the very **best way to learn something.** She mentions that writing (unlike reading, listening, or talking) is **unique** because it **"corresponds to certain powerful learning strategies."** The know the only way I can memorize my scenes in drama, whether it be Shakespeare or Chekhov, I need to write out my lines. It's the only way they get learned. As Emig says, **"Writing is CREATING and ORIGINATING a unique verbal construct that is graphically recorded"**—so it's a super powerful way of learning. It doesn't matter what subject or level—**writing helps all learners learn better.** (Emig quotations are from pg. 103 in our textbook).

All?

Reither and Vipond talk about collaboration. I see how this can connect with Emig's piece. If everyone in your group is writing and learning, the chances of their processing that information and remembering it **are going to make them valuable resources to tap for future information.**

The most important quotes for me came closer to the end, saying that students learn that **"writing and knowing consist in using and building on others' writing and knowing"** and **"texts are figures that arise out of the ground of others' texts."**

Although these points may be valid in some respects, I don't believe all writing is collaboration. In fact, I believe most of my writing is derived from personal experiences, not just from works I read by different people. Reither is not going to have a text written about Christmas at my Aunt's house in 2001 by anyone except me--only I can write that, on my own. Same goes for feelings and emotions, basics of human experience. So to say that "writing is collaboration" is true, but a collaboration so many many things—sights, sounds, smells, you name it. . . But to say "writing cannot be otherwise" is a far cry from the truth.

Mary, you obviously enjoy writing and using it as a tool to sort out your thoughts and emotions. But it is important to remember that people can learn in many different ways. I worked as a professional actor and never once did I write out any of my lines—not did I ever forget or have trouble learning them. Your observations on collaboration as a way of fueling writing are interesting. I think you're on to something when you mention that collaboration can mean taking all information that you come across and extending it to form your own ideas or theories. Kevin

[Note: marginal comments here are written by Kevin himself, on his own inkshed—as required—after having read and commented on all the inksheds in his group.]

Yes, Kevin, you, Carla, and Francis all raise this point about assessment.

I'm very interested in this idea of teaching writing as a collaborative process. I have had some experience in collective theatre and, as theatre is a collaborative form of communication, it may have some similarities or relevance to Reither and Vipond's method of teaching writing. There are a few questions, that I have about the process. The first is in regards to **assessment**. I aim to be a high school teacher, so bear in mind that all my interest is in using this process at that level. As we all know, standardized departmental exams are the norm at the end of grade twelve. Indeed, in many English 30 classrooms, this is what everyone prepares for all year--**often to the exclusion of stuff that should be taught**. Anyhoo, my question is how well would the collaborative or social writing classroom prepare the students for this exam?

What stuff?

Yes, can the method work in our current system?

I realize these departmental tests are contrary to the assessment procedures that R. and V. espouse. However, the reality is that these tests aren't going away any time soon, and **as a high school teacher I am obligated to give my students the best chance possible at doing well on these tests. I would be very interested to know if any teachers are using the social/collaborative method at the high school level and if so, what has the success rate been on the departmental exams?** I would begin my search by contacting R and V and see if they have any stats. I have a friend, a teacher of 30 years, who I mentioned the article to and she said, that they have been using this method in Ontario for some years with great success. I would focus follow-up research here, by contacting the Ontario dept. of education to see if they could give me further info. Hopefully, they could put me in contact with the actual teachers who are using or have used this method in their classrooms. **These are the people I really want to talk to. They are on the front lines--they know what works and what doesn't.**

How about the members of R & V's class? Interesting if they had a different reaction to R & V.

As well, **wouldn't it be interesting to interview the members of a class who have been through this process? Not just one or two, but all the members.** Did it work for some and not for others? Was there a noticeable improvement in the students' achievement? You could compare marks and writing samples from both before and

after the course. How about their attitudes towards researching, writing and reading? Were they better after the course?

In my experience with collective theatre, I found that if you had the right group of people that it could be a truly rewarding and enriching learning experience. However, it was difficult to get a good mix of people. Usually, some people did more than others or some tried to bully their ideas and opinions onto the other members of the group. Resentment was often the result. I noticed that some members of the group were reluctant to share their ideas, feeling them to be not as good or not as important. I wonder if any of these issues would come up in my interviews with the class members.

Okay, now you're answering my initial question.

R. and V. do touch on this in their article, where they talk about creating experts among the group--where some are expert proof-readers, and some are expert note-takers, or some expert researchers. This sounds good to me, but are the students capable of organizing this division of labour in the most efficient and effective manner? Is it instrumental to the method that there be an expert leader-guide-teacher? What would be the result if the teacher was vague or disorganized? The best success I've ever had in collective theatre was when we had a hybrid form of a collective; the members were responsible for the ideas and the formation of the piece, but the director was always there to steer them in a certain direction, to make sure the group didn't implode with infighting or disagreement.

Kevin, you should talk to Francis—he doesn't buy this at all.

I think this method has value and could help a lot of kids. Sure, we all have individual wants, needs and desires, but people can still fulfill all of these while working in a group situation, if they can sense the payoff at the end. Just watch *The Apprentice* if you want to see an example of this; The contestants are all out to win. But by working well in their group to accomplish the task for the week, they can improve their individual odds. Working in group does not have to mean you are putting your needs second.

Mr. Tokarsky,

I'm not sure your analogy between theatre and R & V's method is entirely apt. In theatre, the cast continues to work as a team until the production is over, but in R & V's method, the students are responsible to produce individually their work at the end of the research/collaboration stage. However, I do agree with your comments about the difficulties of group dynamics. I mean, if it was easy to work as a group, then communism would never have failed and I suspect there'd be a lot fewer wars. I'm not saying your classroom is gonna turn into a battlefield if you try this method, but I think you get my point.

Sincerely, Mr. Tokarsky

