Inkshed

Inside *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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Two Responses to Russ Hunt

The Enemy Without or Within? A Response (Sort of) to Russ Hunt

For several years I have been both intrigued and troubled by Russ Hunt's arguments against text(book)s and his experiments with class-produced texts. While I was ready to acknowledge that a wonderful essay by Annie Dillard may indeed go dead between the covers of an anthology, and that students may indeed learn more if they pursue their questions about literature rather than the professor's, I was bothered by questions like these: Are *all* texts in *all* courses *always* guilty by association with the institutionalization of learning? If instead of ordering texts I ask students to provide copies of an essay they consider worth discussing, what about copyright laws? And what purpose does the class-produced text serve?

Into this doubt and confusion came a conference proposal from Doug Vipond and Susan MacDonald (which, unfortunately, they've had to withdraw because of other commitments) about a joint project in which Doug's psychology students were writing material on memory and learning, with Susan's junior high students as their intended audience and active collaborators.

Eureka! Potential new life for my first graduate seminar, which despite my desire to de-emphasize competition and performance in favour of cooperation and collaboration, had somehow ended up as the same old format of presentation and critique that I had endured in graduate school. So with the students' enthusiastic agreement, I scrapped my plans for the second term and they embarked on a collaborative project which turned out to be preparing a set of curriculum materials on language and gender for instructors of first-year courses.

Successful? Ask me at Inkshed 9.

Have I had a conversion experience? Not exactly. Some students came into the course with a substantial background in linguistics, some with no background at all. The reading we did together in the first term provided a necessary common ground for their curriculum project. So if I were teaching the course again I would choose fewer texts, perhaps different texts, and certainly eschew the presentation model of discussing them; but I wouldn't feel guilty about using them.

For me, it seems, texts are not the issue. The issue is to find ways of using texts that embody the values of cooperation and collaboration I am struggling to articulate in my life and in my work.

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Aren't Texts Us Also? A Response to Russ Hunt

Russ Hunt's "R Texts Us?" (*Inkshed* 10.1; 8-9) raises important issues. I find myself nodding in agreement when Russ argues that textbooks, as they are institutionalized in most educational settings, carry with them the aura of "The Truth," and thereby deny students the right to argue with them. But I cannot agree that textbooks are *intrinsically* bad, which is in effect what Russ maintains.

Having co-authored a writing textbook recently, I am aware that one can write a textbook to promote the very kinds of awareness that Russ sees textbooks as undermining. Textbooks can

encourage readers to use group discussion as a means of developing their authority as readers, so that nothing the text proposes needs to go unexamined. Textbooks can invite readers to draw on their experiences and those of their peers to confirm or question what the textbook asserts. The social constructedness of forms, genres, and human knowledge in general can be an issue that is presented head on; so that the very authority of textbooks and academic genres can be debated. Textbooks *can* reveal their reliance on and debt to collaborators — former and current colleagues, students, other writers. Finally, textbooks can be written in ways that devolve authority and responsibility to students, so that the "truth" is no longer transmitted through the teacher, but is engaged by students and redefined in the light of their own experiences and understandings. Eventually, it is up to teachers to enable resistance to the authority of textbooks and to create a climate within which textbooks remain a necessary convenience rather than an oppressive presence.

I am, however, not blind to how sterile and synthetic textbooks can be in their exclusiveness and in their submission to fashion, saleability criteria, marketing economies, and political manoeuvring. But textbooks can be better than worse; and they need not drive the curriculum. Ultimately, it is teachers who do that (and I am not about to make a case for teachers as victims of textbooks — particularly in tertiary education). Moreover, as Deborah Kennedy argues in *Inkshed* 10.3, textbooks often provide accessibility and choice that are not otherwise conveniently available. But, Russ insists, there is no circumventing the inherent directiveness of textbooks, and even if that were possible, the requiredness of most textbooks and their being situated in classrooms disallow dialogic reading and the tentativeness we value in reading.

Even as he says this, Russ extends the definition of the textbook to include the required text, that is, any text that the teacher has chosen for students to read. He doesn't see any reason why all students should read the same text; why they should not comb library shelves or classroom bookshelves to find what they need. While I do not hold a strong brief for textbooks, I do believe that some or even most texts ought to be read in common. In justifying collaborative discussion of common texts, I advance as one powerful justification the observation that the first thing we want to do after we've read a book (of some significance, however defined) is to find someone else who has read the same book. That is why I am anxious to lend books; the unwritten agreement in those loans is that these other readers will talk with me about their reading.

I doubt there are many situations outside classrooms in which thirty or so people will have read the same book. Those opportunities are available in every classroom and should be celebrated for the means they provide to confirm and question our own readings, to realize other possibilities of meaning, to find our voices as readers, to recognize our common humanness in the responses we share, to clarify, to valorize the affective aspects of our reading, to connect with other shared readings and discover other texts that might connect. In all these collaborative transactions, the teacher is an interested and curious spectator. His or her own reading carries too much the aura of authority to be useful to students. In time, these students will have developed sufficient confidence as readers to invite the teacher in as one more contributor to their dialogues with the text; in time these readers will also know they can use textbooks without succumbing to their seeming authority.

I notice I have shifted the argument from considering the unwarranted authority of textbooks to questioning the authority of teachers. This raises issues which I hope to discuss in some depth at Inkshed 9.

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Two Previews of Inkshed 9

Invention in a Museless World (an inventive inquiry)

> "Conformists suspect that to speak of 'inspiration' is as tasteless and old-fashioned
> as to stand up for the Ivory Tower. Yet inspiration exists as do towers and tusks."
>
> -Vladimir Nabokov

High-level context. Following "the inward turn by which Descartes identified truth with human self-consciousness" (Mark C. Taylor 1987), epistemology has been problematic, never "adequate" (cf. John Gage 1984). Modern philosophy has increasingly become a philosophy of "the subject," and consequently we have witnessed the "apotheosis of man" (Taylor). With humanity now "sovereign," the writer should be, more than ever, an "author." And yet, as some postmodernists would have it, the "author is dead."

Mid-level context. On the one hand, the concepts "inspiration" and "the muse" are familiar to generations of humanist scholars. A variety of contemporary writers speak seriously of inspiration, and acknowledge the muse without blushing. On the other hand, words like "inspiration" and "the muse" have disappeared from the lexis of contemporary writing studies.

I would like to see Inkshed 9 attendees grapple actively with some questions which revolve around a fundamental epistemic question, begged by positivism and postmodernism alike: Where do ideas come from? Whence novelty?

These questions, for contemplation and discussion, include: In your own writing experience, where do new ideas come from? What implications do an emphasis on community and social context have for invention? What do we teach when we teach invention "heuristics"? What don't we teach? What does it mean when a student says (s)he "can't come up with any ideas"? Can or should writing teachers teach writers how to find, invent, or cultivate a muse? What can a "museless" writing theory make of creativity and inspiration? Why, in the last half of the twentieth century, is it easier for theorists to speak of "magic" (e.g., Elbow 1981) than of "inspiration"?

Jamie MacKinnon
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The Rhetoric of Handbooks

Composition instructors who order handbooks for their students often use only pragmatic criteria in their text selection: is the book comprehensive? are explanations clear? are examples abundant? is the cost reasonable? is the book easily portable? While rhetorics and readers are perused more thoughtfully, handbooks are treated as neutral, even transparent, texts, not requiring critical examination. Some instructors have misgivings about using a handbook at all: "handbook guilt" may lead them to minimize attention to their choice.

Handbooks, however, like other composition texts, are based on theories of writing. Moreover, they inhabit, and they promote, contexts for writing—epistemological, political, and cultural. Handbooks, for example, advise our students about what constitutes the act of writing, what constitutes "good" writing, who writes, and for what purposes, and who has the right to be read.

My presentation at Inkshed 9 will examine the subtexts of handbooks and will suggest a list of critical questions to inform handbook selection.

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Rescuing Psychology's Subject

Review of Kurt Danziger, *Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990, 254 pages).

I realize that *Inkshed* is not the usual place to talk about the history of psychology, but Kurt Danziger's *Constructing the Subject* is an unusual book. I want to talk about it because it's an important book for me as a psychologist to come to terms with, and I'd like to talk about it here because I think there are a couple of connections to Inkshedders' concerns. In the first place, Danziger invites everybody — humanist and human scientist alike — to reassess the place of quantification and statistical thinking in modern knowledge. His work casts doubt, for instance, on the possibility of "universal" writing or reading processes, even when they're dressed up in a lot of glamorous statistics. Second, Danziger argues that psychology needs to open itself to other fields of inquiry — including fields like English studies, rhetoric, and composition studies — because doing so will enrich and extend our conceptions of "psychological reality."

Three models of early psychological research

In psychology now there is one overwhelmingly dominant way of doing research. But Danziger shows that when psychology emerged as a discipline in the late 19th century, there were at least three highly distinct strands. These are identified as the Leipzig model, the Paris model, and the Galtonian model.

In the Leipzig model, which originated with Wilhelm Wundt, experiments were performed in order to discover the causal laws of individual consciousness. The experimenter systematically varied conditions, noting how experience changed as a result. Experiments required only one highly trained, expert observer who could attest to his own experience (all participants were male); further observers were essentially replications. In terms of its social organization, the Leipzig model featured collaboration and interchangeability between experimenter and observer roles. In modern psychology labs, of course, the experimenter is far more important and more powerful than the "subject," but this wasn't the case in Leipzig. There, if anything, the observer was the more important player, because only he had access to his own consciousness (Wundt himself was more likely to play the observer than the experimenter role).

In the Paris model there was a power imbalance between the (male) experimenter and the (usually female) subject. This mode of research developed in a medical context as an extension of the doctor-patient relationship. Jean Charcot (one of Freud's mentors) popularized the "clinical experiment," the purpose of which was to investigate abnormal experience, often using hypnosis. The power asymmetry between experimenter and subject is a feature that present-day investigators have adopted intact from the Paris model.

The Galtonian model was concerned with the measurement of human attributes such as reaction time and strength. In this type of research, the experimenter and the subject came together briefly on a fee-for-service basis. This was a contractual relationship in which both parties got something. The subject-client found out how he or she compared to others, and the experimenter got a huge amount of data which enabled him to estimate population characteristics. Unlike their colleagues in Leipzig and Paris, Galtonian researchers had no interest in individual experience as such. Their interest was in the statistical distribution of characteristics across populations.

Evolution of a hybrid form

In place of the diversity of investigative practices in the late 19th century, what gradually emerged in the 20th century was a single model. This was a hybrid form: it featured (Leipzigian) experimentation in a statistical (Galtonian) framework. Danziger calls it the "neo-Galtonian" model.

One familiar type of neo-Galtonian research is the "treatment group" design. In such research the experimenter advances a hypothesis; for instance, variable A (e.g., study time) is predicted to have an effect on variable B (e.g., learning). The experimenter randomly assigns subjects to groups, giving the groups different amounts of study time. The experimenter collects data from the groups and analyzes these results statistically. In an especially important step, the procedures of statistical inference are used to find out if the differences between groups are larger than would be expected by chance. If so, the differences are attributed to the treatment variable and the hypothesis is confirmed: study time does affect learning. It cannot be over-emphasized, though, that the theoretical (psychological) conclusion is now entirely dependent on the statistical inference. This is what Danziger has described elsewhere as "the methodological imperative."

Although over-simplified, this snapshot illustrates the vast differences between mainstream research practices in the 20th century and Wundt's experiments in Leipzig just a few decades earlier. The mainstream, neo-Galtonian model was a product of its time. In the 1920s big research money became available, but only for projects deemed to be socially useful, projects that would further the cause of "social control." Psychologists therefore tried to find universal laws of behaviour. For instance, they sought to discover principles of learning that would apply equally to workers in a factory and children in a classroom.

The neo-Galtonian model seemed to lend itself to the discovery of universal laws because it produced statistical abstractions. Such abstract results (like the relationship between study time and learning) appeared to be true "in general" because they were not attributed to individual participants or local settings. In neo-Galtonian research, subjects are literally anonymous (contrary to previous practice, they are not named in research reports). Danziger notes, white rats and college students fill the bill admirably.

It's a key point that psychology shifted from the study of individuals (Wundt) to the study of abstractions. Differences between individuals were averaged out. This was "the triumph of the aggregate." Psychology constructed collective subjects (statistical abstractions) and advanced universal laws even though its products didn't have to conform to the behaviour or experience of any single individual.

Thus the subject that psychology constructed in this century is a statistical one. And that leads me to think that the title of the book, *Constructing the Subject*, has a sharp edge: it's clear Danziger believes psychology made a major error when it decided to investigate artificial, statistically-constituted subjects rather than actual people in concrete settings. "Constructing" the subject? Danziger deconstructs psychology's generally false claims to universal knowledge.

An alternative: Lewin's Berlin group

Although it is not Danziger's purpose to elaborate on alternatives, we glimpse a different set of investigative practices in his description of Kurt Lewin's research group, which flourished briefly in pre-Nazi Berlin. Lewin's group studied the person-in-a-situation. They did experimental simulations of human situations (for example, anger-producing situations). They were interested in

exploring the psychological meaning of such situations, and it's noteworthy that the experimenters themselves were very much a part of them. Lewin and his colleagues firmly rejected the "arithmomorphic" impulse. This doesn't mean that they rejected all quantification. It's simply that, as one commentator put it, they didn't allow the statistical tail to wag the psychological dog.

Caught in its own constructive web

Psychology claimed to have access to universal laws, but it was bound by the regularities found in local investigative situations. Psychology was thus caught in "the web of its own constructions" (194). What does this mean? It means that although psychology's knowledge products were tied to the investigative situations that produced them, psychologists deluded themselves into thinking that these products were true for all times and all places.

In Danziger's view, there were two main reasons that psychology got itself tangled up. First was the "cult of empiricism," according to which all psychological concepts had to be closely tied to empirical domains. Second, psychology cut itself off from "potentially liberating influences" (194) — here he mentions other social and human sciences, as well as philosophy — that could have helped psychologists develop more adequate conceptions of "psychological reality."

In the realist philosophy of science that Danziger ultimately endorses, this notion of psychological reality is important. He distinguishes between the psychologically "real" and the "actual." The "real" refers to causal or generative mechanisms, whereas the "actual" refers to empirical domains and the investigative practices that constitute them. The true task of psychology is to confront models of psychological reality with empirical domains, and vice versa. However, models of psychological reality would be more adequately critiqued and explored if they were confronted not with a single standard empirical domain, based on data collected in neo-Galtonian experiments, but rather with different domains and practices. Danziger says explicitly that these divergent domains and practices ought to include those that, "for entirely extraneous reasons, have become identified with other disciplines, like linguistics, sociology, or anthropology" (196-7). Or, I would add, emphatically, English studies, rhetoric, and composition. This then, is the reason English studies is important for psychology; it is one of the "potentially liberating influences." If psychology is going to develop more adequate notions of psychological reality, it needs to be far more open than it has been to these other influences.

"And in the end"

I find Danziger's critique wrenching, of course: he undercuts most of what I have been taught (and what I used to teach) in psychology. In that sense his work is "subversive" — it subverts the mainstream view. But I also find the book exhilarating, just because his critique is so devastatingly thorough but still scholarly and understated (the endnotes alone could support a graduate course in the history of science), and I find it liberating, because he suggests ways of thinking about alternatives to the standard approach.

I suppose what I find most affirming is that Danziger suggests going outside psychology for alternative takes on psychological reality. Besides, the "confrontations" with various empirical domains and investigative practice should not, as he says, be merely intellectual exercises. As long as they're at that level they won't have much hope of influence. What he's talking about then is "social alliances" between psychology and other fields of inquiry. In other words, if psychology is to be open to other kinds of knowledge, it must expand not only its investigative practices but also its

"social and cultural commitments." I find this an especially intriguing point. And it is exactly here that organizations and forums like CCCC, CASWAR, and *Inkshed* are vital, because they provide multidisciplinary space where all sorts of people (not just English teachers) are made to feel welcome and can talk. In that sense, talking about the history of psychology in this newsletter perhaps isn't so unusual after all.

[I thank Patrick Dias, Russ Hunt, Susan MacDonald, and Jim Reither for helpful responses to an earlier version of this piece.]

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