

(Re-)Mapping the System: Toward Dialogue-Driven Transformation in the Teaching and Assessment of Writing

David Slomp¹, Roger Graves², Bob Broad³

¹University of Lethbridge, ²University of Alberta, ³Illinois State University

Over three days, 180 junior and senior high school English teachers, postsecondary (university and college) writing instructors, workplace (corporate and small business) writing instructors, and government officials who are responsible for portfolios related to workforce training and literacy met to understand from a broad systems-level perspective how writing development was being supported and assessed in Alberta Canada. Conversations were structured using Dynamic Criteria Mapping (Broad, 2003) as a method for understanding the values, expectations, and contextual factors that shape the system. Participants shared values related to clarity of expression, risk-taking, and ability to motivate audience. These values, however, were enacted differently within school and workplace contexts. Writing as a problem-solving activity was identified as a tool for enhancing knowledge transfer within the system. Alberta's large-scale writing exams, on the other hand, created barriers to transfer and development by undermining shared values within the system. Recommendations related to curriculum redesign, pedagogical change, assessment reform, and professional development are suggested for enhancing students' longitudinal development as writers.

Pendant trois jours, 180 enseignants d'anglais au secondaire (de la 7^e à la 12^e), professeurs d'écriture au post-secondaire (université et collège), enseignants d'écriture en milieu de travail (sociétés commerciales et petites entreprises) et fonctionnaires responsables de dossiers relatifs à la formation et la littéracie en milieu de travail, se sont rencontrés pour déterminer, selon une perspective élargie au niveau des systèmes, dans quelle mesure le développement de l'écriture est appuyé et évalué en Alberta, au Canada. Les conversations étaient articulées sur le recensement de critères dynamiques de Broad, 2003 (Dynamic Criteria Mapping) comme méthode pour comprendre les valeurs, les attentes et les facteurs contextuels qui façonnent le système. Les participants ont fait part de leurs valeurs liées à la clarté de l'expression, la prise de risques et la capacité de motiver un public. Toutefois, ces valeurs ne se manifestaient pas de la même façon dans un contexte scolaire que dans un milieu de travail. En tant qu'activité de résolution de problèmes, la rédaction a été identifiée comme outil pour améliorer le transfert de connaissances au sein du système. Pourtant, les examens à grande échelle portant sur l'expression écrite en Alberta posaient des obstacles au transfert et au développement en ébranlant les valeurs partagées au sein du système. On présente des recommandations touchant une reformulation du curriculum, des changements pédagogiques, une refonte de l'évaluation et le perfectionnement professionnel, le tout visant une amélioration du développement longitudinal de l'expression écrite chez les étudiants.

Teaching others how to write is a difficult and complex task made all the more challenging by the competing messages from textbook publishers and software developers pushing packaged writing programs, government-mandated assessment programs asserting implicit claims about what understandings of writing should be valued, professional organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English that promote perspectives of researchers in the field, and from state/provincial standards documents that tend to reflect a curious mix of perspectives and voices. Teachers are often overwhelmed by these competing voices as they try to translate theory into local practice.

These challenges are compounded by the fact that many of the sources of information on the teaching of writing take a short-term view of the task rather than considering the longitudinal needs of writers as they develop across their life-span. The project that we report on applies a longer-term perspective to understanding the problem of how to teach writing, how to assess writing abilities, and how to develop writing teachers professionally.

Defining the Challenge

The great challenge of preparing today's student writers is that they need to develop the skills necessary *to continually learn how to write* across the range of modalities (social media, email), genres (reports, letters), and contexts (social, business) that they will be faced with when they transition from high school classrooms to university and college courses, and into the workforce and the roles of democratic citizenship. Historically, the attrition rate at North American postsecondary institutions has been between 30-40%. One study in Ontario found that 77% of those students withdrew by the end of their first term and that a major factor in their withdrawal was academic unpreparedness in literacy and mathematics (Fisher & Engelman, 2009). In fact, learning to write in postsecondary contexts is one of the most significant challenges students face in college. Sommers and Saltz (2004) found that the most important thing students learn about writing during their first year of college was that what made them successful in high school didn't work for them anymore. Beaufort (2007) makes similar claims about the challenges students face when transitioning from college to the workforce. A growing body of research supports their findings, suggesting that writing instruction across the K-postsecondary continuum is more often than not failing to provide students with the transferable knowledge about writing that will enhance how effectively they take up writing required of them in new contexts (Wardle, 2007). If we can learn how to better smooth the learning road as writers move across contexts, we can improve college retention rates, build student academic success, and increase workplace productivity and participation in democratic processes.

In the past decade, composition researchers have increasingly focused on trying to understand why students often fail to efficiently apply knowledge about writing developed in one context to writing tasks in new contexts and with new technologies. This research has led to experimentation with new research frameworks for investigating transfer (Brent, 2012; Roozen, 2010; Wardle, 2007), engendered new approaches to postsecondary writing curricula and pedagogy (Beaufort, 2007; Downs & Wardle, 2007), and generated new approaches to the assessment of writing (Slomp, 2012; Wardle & Roozen, 2012). Missing from this body of research have been studies that try to understand the challenges involved in this work from a broad systems-level perspective. The work we are presenting in this paper has been designed to address this broader perspective.

Method

Over three days (October 26, 2012, April 6, 2013, and April 11, 2014), we brought together 180 junior and senior high school English teachers, postsecondary (university and college) writing instructors, workplace (corporate and small business) writing instructors, and government officials (both provincial and federal) who are responsible for portfolios related to workforce training and literacy. On each of these days, this eclectic group discussed issues related to the teaching of writing and the development of writing ability across their range of contexts within the province of Alberta, Canada.

Each of these days was structured around five conversations. Presenters with expertise related to each conversation's focus introduced or framed the discussion through a 10- to 15-minute presentation on the topic. This was followed by 45 minutes of both small- and large-group discussions. Participants were seated at tables in groups of five to eight. One person at each table was a scribe who live-blogged his or her group's discussion¹. These blogs were projected onto several screens in the conference room so that participants could view them and reflect on them as the conversations unfolded.

The first two conference days were each structured around the following 5 sets of questions:

1. How are the rhetorical situations in which you engage your students related to professional, civic, and other kinds of writing in the world beyond school
2. What are the qualities that you value in your own writing?
3. What are the qualities that mark good writing in the contexts in which you teach and work?
4. What would you want teachers of writing in the contexts that precede and/or follow your context to know about your teaching of writing (goals, challenges, affordances)? and
5. What themes emerged within and between the conversations that occurred today? What gaps have become apparent through these conversations? What implications for writing curricula and assessment practices might be drawn from these conversations?

The third conference day was structured around the following 5 conversations:

1. What do studies in writing tell us about how students transform their writing skills across diverse contexts?
2. What challenges do employers face when developing employee writing skills?
3. What role does government have in supporting the cross-contextual development of writers?
4. How do we and how might we support adult students as they move through education and training and into the workplace? and
5. What are the implications you draw from these conversations for your own work and for a networked approach to addressing the development of writing ability in Alberta?

The first two conference days relied very heavily on a process called Dynamic Criteria Mapping (DCM). As discussed in Broad's (2003) *What We Really Value: Beyond Rubrics in Teaching and Assessing Writing*, DCM creates a space in which writing teachers explore, negotiate, and document their writing values. This process is critical to our discussions because before teachers can understand the strengths or weaknesses of any approach to writing instruction or assessment, they need a clear, vivid portrait of what they value in students'

writing. Without a clear picture of what is being valued, teachers lack a frame of reference by which to judge the validity of a pedagogical approach or an assessment regime. Unlike traditional approaches to communal writing assessment, the DCM process is empirical (based on what teachers actually say they value) and inductive (teachers' values are discovered through careful study of what they say about their students' writing). These methodological features of DCM yield a robust, high-quality, evidence-based account of instructors' values.

DCM is also designed to help participants build shared values, enhance appreciation for differences among the values they hold, and develop a deeper sense of evaluative community and engagement. Our initial conversations during our first two conference days focused on two papers written by Alberta students, one in grade 10 and the other in the first year at a university. Other conversations during this conference series that did not focus on specific student texts were designed within the spirit of DCM, meaning that they focused on open and generative dialogue that represented the breadth of participants' contexts, experiences, and perspectives. Once each conference was completed, a document summarizing conversations from each day was written and distributed to participants. These documents were also provided as pre-reading material to registrants for the second and third conference days.

In the sections that follow, we present the major themes that emerged from these discussions and we explore their implications for preparing today's student writers for the challenges of writing in the 21st century.

Shared yet Different: Mapping Values within the System

In our three days of discussions about writing instruction in Alberta, it became clear that many values were held in common by participants across all levels of Alberta's education system but that there were notable differences in rationale supporting those values.

Clear Writing

Workplaces often do not use clear language—that is a problem. (AB3 Participant)

Shared values might be somewhat predictable. In all contexts, the ability to generate clear, concise, and highly polished writing was important. In school settings this value was linked to clear communication as a general value. Expressing this value, one participant commented, "Government needs to have a commitment to plain language because when navigating government documents it is extremely difficult for many individuals to access the information and documents that they need to." In the workplace, this set of values was linked to the high stakes (including death) associated with the production or dissemination of texts.

One participant representing small business owners observed that the "workplace has less tolerance for error" because errors may result in lost contracts, increased costs, legally binding mistakes, unsafe situations, and job loss.

Audience

Write for the funder etc., and write for the type of reading. Are they going to read it for detail or . . . scan for key information? (AB3 Participant)

The capacity of a text to respond to the needs and expectations of its audience through the author's capacity to judiciously select genres and modalities, shape voice, and polish text to

enhance its effect on its readers was a value that was consistently held across this range of contexts. However, conference participants felt that this value lived out quite differently in school settings versus workplace settings. Often in school settings, audience was defined in terms of the teacher. If broader, external audiences were considered, they were often ill-defined or poorly examined. Consequently, student writers were rarely required to identify gaps in their knowledge about those audiences. In such cases, the teacher remained the sole arbiter of quality and so students learned often, regardless of genre or task, to write for only one person. Conversely, workplace audiences tended to be clearly defined to specific individuals or groups of individuals, which allowed for more rigorous analysis of audience expectations and needs.

Risk-Taking

A third shared value was for environments that encouraged and supported ongoing learning through openness to risk-taking. For secondary and postsecondary writing instructors, writers' risk-taking was important because it enabled students to push the boundaries of what they knew and were able to do. In workplace contexts, an environment that encouraged risk-taking was important because many workplace writers are learning on the job. A fear of risk, for example, resulted in loss of productivity, as employees were reticent to take on new tasks if they were concerned that failure would be met with negative consequences.

Both workplace and high school writing instructors, however, felt that this value was not reflected well in the environments in which they worked or taught. High school teachers frequently pointed to Alberta's diploma exam in English as the highest-risk aspect of this course. Reflecting on the Alberta Writes 1 conference discussions, one secondary teacher commented, "What we talked about today is what I **want** to teach. Curriculum and diploma prep is what I **have** to teach" [emphasis added]. Because of the stakes associated with the exam, preparing students for success drives much of the writing instruction in Alberta high schools.

In workplace environments, participants suggested that risk is often elevated through the high-stakes nature of written communication where mistakes can lead to increased costs, lost contracts, and other complications. Additionally, many workplace writers are not provided with training related to the writing tasks assigned to them. Rather, they are expected to possess the skills needed to complete the job when they are hired or they are expected to figure out what they need to learn while completing the task at hand. As one participant noted, this is true beyond the work environment as well: "The pathway to getting good writing skills is not just about getting employed, it is about serving a personal purpose, be it a personal sense of achievement or engagement in community (citizenship)." (AB3 Participant)

School and Work: Two Contrasting Contexts

Work[place] writing has many people involved while most academic [writing] is individual. (AB3 Participant)

Other differences in the values pursued in school settings and those in workplace environments make this more difficult for transitioning workplace writers. School-based writing instructors emphasized that they wanted to help students cultivate distinctive voices, passion, conviction, and commitment to ideas. This set of values is consistent with the expressivist pedagogies that influence writing instruction in the K-12 and first-year postsecondary contexts. Workplace writers, however, focused on conformity more than individuality. Understanding and

learning to deliver on the purpose behind each writing task were paramount. In corporate settings, individual voice can be a distraction because writing is about the work more than it is the employee. In these contexts conformity is essential because the corporate persona is more important than the individual voice. Workplace writers who haven't figured this out face additional challenges in their transition to writing in the workforce.

Related to this is a difference between values associated with the individual versus the organization. School-based writing instruction, drawing on expressivist theories of pedagogy tends to place a high value on individualism. While workshop approaches to writing pedagogy abound, many student experiences of learning to write focus solely on the individual writer working alone, independent of his or her peers. The most common form of peer involvement in writing is through peer response activities rather than through generative, collaborative processes. Conversely, workplace writing tends to be collaborative. Texts often develop in circulation with other workers and departments, which changes a document's structure, content, and organization. Ethical standards and conventions around issues like plagiarism are defined differently from school-based writing. In the workplace, new employees need to learn how collaborative cultures function and they need to learn how to function within these cultures (skills that our participants agreed were rarely taught in school settings).

A final set of values articulated by participants from workplace settings (but not by participants in school settings) was the ability to approach writing from a problem-solving perspective. Participants made it clear that industry leaders value an employee's capacity to figure out how to successfully complete new writing tasks with limited support. This insight not only reflects the literature on knowledge transfer and writing (Beaufort, 2007), it provides a framework for thinking about how to begin developing a more integrated system. If we can tease out the problem-solving skills required for successful transfer, then we can better build our instruction and assessment to support the development of those skills. Problem solving orients both learning and instruction toward critical reflection. Slomp (2012) and Leu, Slomp, Corrigan and Zawilinski (in press) articulated a developmental model of writing that has been oriented around a problem-solving focus. There are two broad categories of knowledge at the center of this model: metacognitive knowledge about the best way of solving writing problems and conceptual knowledge about the nature of writing (Davies & Birbili, 2000).

A System that Works Against Itself

Conference participants had much to say about how well the school system in Alberta as a whole was functioning with respect to building problem-solving capacity in student writers. A general consensus of these meetings was that as it currently stands, the system was not functioning well. An important structural concern across high school, postsecondary, and workplace contexts were the limitations in writing instruction and resources put towards supporting the development of writers in each of these contexts. Central to this issue was the recognition that writing was a situated practice. Context and purpose help define the markers of effective writing. At the same time, processes and procedures used in composition are dependent on the contexts and cultures in which the writing occurs. Yet in each of the contexts discussed, writing instruction was either de-contextual or too singular in focus. The challenge for learners, then, was that often learning to write focused on single contexts rather than on developing a transferable set of writing skills.

Longitudinal studies are needed to understand how successful programs and learners are. In a small snapshot, failure is emphasized; over a longer period of time, research would show that success is complex and often takes time, needing to set up supports within a program and within one's own life for learning. (AB3 Participant)

Learning to Write Solely in English

High school teachers participating in our conferences reported that in many of their schools, writing instruction was seen solely as the responsibility of the English teacher. In previous years, Alberta government-mandated diploma exams in science and social studies included written components. However, in recent years these written components have been removed. These moves, our participants feared, enhance the idea that writing instruction is solely the responsibility of the English teacher.

Narrow Focus of the Test

An equally important concern raised by participants who taught in the K-12 system was the narrowness in focus that was being driven by the diploma exam program in grade 12 as well as the provincial achievement testing program in grades 3, 6, and 9. All of these exams share similarities in limitations.

[W]e do disservice to our students if we do not give students anything to do beyond the five-paragraph essay. We have to give opportunities to go beyond that. Yes, it is a lot of work. . . . It is necessary to teach to the exam to a degree, but we must go beyond that. (AB1 Participant)

Alberta's grade 12 English exam (Eng 30-1) acts as a bridge between the high school and the university. It functions as a high school graduation requirement in Alberta, with student scores on this exam constituting 50% of the final course grade. This exam also fulfills an entrance requirement for students who are applying to Alberta postsecondary institutions. Students must report their diploma exam scores on their university applications and these scores guide admissions decisions. So a large amount of power situated in the grading structure, the college admissions process, and the wider school culture, drives English language arts teachers to devote significant time and energy to preparing their students to take the standardized writing test. At the grade 3, 6, and 9 levels, the Alberta Provincial Achievement Tests do not carry the same stakes. Student performance on these tests is not used for grading purposes. However, schools are ranked in the media each year based on how well students have performed on these tests. Each year, school administrators encourage teachers to examine test results and provide plans for how they will improve in the coming year. This also drives teachers to put a significant emphasis on preparing students for the test.

Similar to large-scale writing exams in other contexts, the problem with Alberta's government-mandated writing assessment program is that it enacts a radically narrower set of writing values than those articulated by participants at the conferences. Alberta's teachers want students to develop their compositions over time, to receive substantive critical responses to drafts, and to engage in deep revision but the standardized writing assessments only allow students to write first-draft answers to two unfamiliar questions in unrealistically tight timeframes. One participant expressed concern about this artificial format for writing, "Students have a difficult time putting their ideas into a coherent structure on the spot." The only response

students receive on these writing assessments is one numerical test score. One teacher observed the inadequacy of this aspect of the exam, “Evaluation is not a one-shot deal. Students need more feedback, from more people.”

Writing Prompts

Participating teachers said that they yearn to see students engage in questions and problems that students care about deeply, yet a core element of government-mandated assessments are writing prompts that require students to respond to a selection of texts or materials that they have never seen before on a topic they have not chosen. These teachers know that students’ best ideas develop over time and through robust writing processes of invention, drafting, response, research, revision, and proofreading. They also know that developing a composition’s shape and content comes first and proofreading and editing come last. In the short time span that Alberta’s assessment program allows for writing, students are expected to demonstrate competence related to the following criteria:

- The capacity to develop insightful content;
- The ability to develop, employ, and synthesize evidence to support ideas;
- The ability to develop a coherent, focused, and shaped text, one that demonstrates a unifying effect or controlling idea;
- The ability to use diction, syntactic structures, and stylistic choices to create voice and to enhance their text; and
- The ability to create polished text that adheres to standards of correctness.

In other words, teachers know that whatever students are able to do on Alberta’s provincial writing exams will be a dim shadow of what students can do—and should have to do—when provided with appropriate opportunities to do authentic, high-quality writing in postsecondary and workplace contexts. The design of Alberta’s standardized writing exams pressures teachers to focus their instruction on the limited skills prompted and measured by these assessments, as one participant noted, “As a high school teacher, as much as I value the writing process, I always am aware of the diploma [exam]; this influences what I am able to teach my students.”

Values

In another conversation, participants answered the question, “What do we value in student writing?” These were the values they discovered:

- Risk-taking;
- Having the initiative to resist formulas;
- Caring about [writing] process;
- Having the patience to re-write;
- Passion for their projects: a sense of caring, commitment, conviction, and engagement;
- Developing distinctive voice (ethos) and eloquence;
- Using evidence to support and develop ideas;

- Creating polished texts across multiple genres and modes (e.g., compositions with visual and audio elements);
- Appealing to diverse audiences; and
- Scientific minds at work.

However, as participants' comments on Alberta's assessment program indicate, these tests, like any other timed, impromptu standardized writing tests, strongly pressures teachers to teach contrary to these deeply-held values. Additionally, we would point out that the list presented above is strongly countermanded by the obligation to prepare students for the timed test, since the test does not and cannot assess these important writing abilities. At this point, it is important to emphasize that there is nothing idiosyncratic or odd about participants' values related to students' writing. To the contrary, numerous researchers have raised alarms over the past twenty years about the gaps between timed, impromptu testing and best methods for teaching writing (Hillocks, 2002 Purves, 1985). Realigning Alberta's writing assessment program to better reflect and support the values embedded with the system will go a long way toward opening space for teachers to focus on the longitudinal development of writers.

Implications: Closing the Gaps & Realigning the System

The final conversation at each of our three conferences focused on exploring implications for individual instructor practices and the system as a whole. Although the list of implications they developed across these conversations was quite extensive, four major integrated themes emerged. We have captured these in the following four recommendations, which we believe are relevant in many jurisdictions beyond the Alberta context.

Recommendation 1: Build a More Integrated and Sustained Curriculum

It is important that we move away from the current siloed approach to teaching writing toward a more integrated program of writing instruction. At the K-12 level, this means a greater focus on writing across the curriculum (WAC), and at the postsecondary level, this means the development of purposefully integrated WAC programs that have been envisioned with clear horizontal and vertical dimensions in mind. Curriculum needs to be developed in conversation with partners at all levels of the system. K-12 curriculum needs to be designed to better scaffold to the workplace, the not-for-profit and the postsecondary sector. Similarly, postsecondary curricula need to better build off of the foundations provided in the K-12 system and need to better reflect the skills required by industry and not-for-profit sectors. Frequent and sustained dialogue about curriculum design at all levels of the system will help to ensure that gaps in the system do not further widen.

Alberta is currently in the process of engaging in a significant curriculum redesign project at the K-12 level. *Inspiring Education* (Government of Alberta, 2010) envisions a curriculum that will develop the following traits in Alberta's students:

- Engaged Thinker: who thinks critically and makes discoveries; who uses technology to learn, innovate, communicate, and discover; who works with multiple perspectives and disciplines to identify problems and find the best solutions; who communicates these ideas to others; and who, as a life-long learner, adapts to change with an attitude of optimism and hope for

the future.

- Ethical Citizen: who builds relationships based on humility, fairness and open-mindedness; who demonstrates respect, empathy and compassion; and who through teamwork, collaboration, and communication contributes fully to the community and the world.
- Entrepreneurial Spirit: who creates opportunities and achieves goals through hard work, perseverance and discipline; who strives for excellence and earns success; who explores ideas and challenges the status quo; who is competitive, adaptable, and resilient; and who has the confidence to take risks and make bold decisions in the face of adversity. (pp. 5, 6).

These qualities very much reflect the qualities articulated by our conference participants. They emphasize the need for a curriculum that is designed to reflect a problem-solving model of instruction, emphasizes metacognition, and empowers students to develop and apply conceptual knowledge about writing. Such a curriculum should be structured according to the knowledge domains laid out in Appendix A.

Recommendation 2: Develop a Problem-Solving Writing Pedagogy

We recognize that redesigning curriculum itself will not lead to changes in learning. Entrenched practice is often more resilient than curricular change. To drive changes in student learning about writing, we propose the following three changes in instructional practice:

First, rather than working from templates or being told how to structure and write specific texts, students need to gain experience deconstructing and reconstructing exemplar texts. Through this process they can develop the skills to identify genre features, rhetorical moves, approaches to handling content, and an awareness of how authors translate audience analysis into textual features. Engaging in this form of document analysis on an ongoing basis will also enable students to learn how to identify strong examples from weak examples, a skill many of our industry participants indicated was lacking in many employees.

Second, the call for building writing instruction around authentic tasks has been in the literature for some time (Wiggins, 1990) but the reality (in many cases) is that authentic writing assessments are often only pseudo-authentic largely because the instructor who assigned the work has remained the sole audience. A new curriculum needs to be enacted with a greater emphasis on writing for actual, real audiences beyond the classroom and for audiences that can be meaningfully analyzed. One approach to achieving this in writing assignments is to substantively involve industry connections through co-op programs, practicum courses, and community-service learning projects.

Finally, a new curriculum needs to be enacted with a greater emphasis on collaboration and feedback. Students should engage with team-based writing projects in which group processes and peer feedback are learned and applied. Providing and receiving feedback from peers fosters metacognitive engagement. It can also enable students to learn how to account for the potentially overwhelming initial experience of receiving negative feedback. Group learning can broaden students' focus beyond teachers' evaluations. This collaborative context enables opportunity for more nuanced discussions of the ethics of collaboration and plagiarism.

These three areas of emphasis would enable student writers to more effectively engage in a problem-solving model of writing. They would also seamlessly integrate with a transfer-oriented model of expertise in writing. One example of a writing assignment that enacts the problem-solving model can be found in Appendix B.

Recommendation 3: Develop Government-Mandated Writing Assessments that Measure What Our Society Values in Writing

Curriculum redesign is insufficient for enacting system-wide change. Even more resilient to change than is entrenched teaching practice are government-mandated standardized assessment programs. The simple fact of the matter is even if every aspect of an educational system is changed, the lived curriculum or the enacted system will not change if the standardized assessments that are part of that system are not simultaneously revised. Slomp (2008) demonstrated that Alberta's English 30-1 exam overrode teachers' professional judgments about what aspects of writing they should be teaching. His current study with 15 Grade-9 language arts teachers in southern Alberta is producing similar findings, where the vast majority (almost 90%) of writing tasks assigned by these participants are modeled directly after the prompts on the Grade 9 achievement testing program.

A key reason many teachers attended the Alberta Writes conference series was so that they could explore the possibility of teaching beyond the test. These teachers were committed to teaching writing in a manner that prepared students for life beyond the provincial achievement tests, the diploma exam, and the university. At the same time, many felt that this was not possible, that because the test carried so much weight, they had a primary responsibility to prepare their students for this exam. One participant commented:

I teach high school English; I question what we teach in high school English and to what level. Our exam is worth 50%. So, we don't want to teach to the exam but it is a catch 22 . . . if we don't teach to the exam, students won't have high enough grades to get into university. (AB1 Participant)

In addition to their own sense of professional responsibility to ensure that students are well prepared for this high-stakes diploma exam, teachers feel pressure from students to make sure they get the exam scores they need. Linking the issue of *teaching to the test* with the observations made by Sommers and Saltz, one participating teacher commented, "Students only see the end result. 'I need to get this mark to get into university', but they forget that once they get into university they need to stay there." (AB1 Participant)

This issue of teaching to the test has historically been constructed by the psychometric community as a problem stemming from poor teacher practice. Cohen and Wollack (2006) consider teaching to the test to be a form of teacher cheating, one that distorts student performance and creates validity problems for these tests. Their suggestion is that teachers engage in this practice to gain an unethical advantage for themselves or their students. This is, however, a naïve view of the situation. As the teachers who participated in our three conferences made clear, teaching to the test is primarily a construct validity issue. That is, if the standardized test captured the full range of curriculum outcomes and if the test fully captured an appropriate writing construct, then teaching to the test would naturally parallel teaching to the curriculum or teaching to the construct.

However, when the test fails to adequately capture the construct or the curriculum, then teachers have to make pedagogical choices that best navigate the resulting tensions. When the construct problem is coupled with the high stakes attached to the exam, then the choice teachers make is inevitable. Of course, teachers wouldn't have to make the choice to narrow their teaching to the exam if the exam's construct of writing was adequate in the first place.

In the past, calls for curricula and assessment redesign have resulted in limited progress. To further the call for curricula and assessment reform, we recommend working closer with industry and not-for-profit sectors, demonstrating to those organizations that current standardized writing assessments are compelling K-12 writing instructors to focus on helping students develop the limited skills needed for success on government-mandated exams rather than on the problem solving skills needed for success beyond school. If the voices of industry can be brought in to support research-informed calls for curricula and assessment reform, then government may begin to take these calls for reform more seriously.

Recommendation 4: Dialogue-Driven Transformation

Government support for models of education where industry and education partner to develop curriculum and target skills. Germany [is an] example where learning and funding is shared. Does this fly with Alberta? Canada? Your community? (AB3 Participant)

We specifically recommend that teachers and administrators in a wide variety of contexts (provinces, states, countries) actively pursue dialogue-based professional development like the Alberta Writes conferences described here. We found DCM a powerful approach to foster teachers' conversations about their writing values. Furthermore, the DCM discussions led directly to insights and critiques of the mis-match between teachers' values and the government-mandated exam. We see significant potential for the record of these discussions to help bring about dramatic changes to how students' writing is assessed. We hope that no one listening to these teachers' concerns will remain satisfied with the limitations of the current system.

On a wider scale, we urge all educators to undertake dialogue-driven professional development. We propose that educators put aside the phrase *professional development* because it is too limited a description of what can and should take place when teachers gather to discuss educational values, methods, and goals. Instead, we propose naming these events *dialogue-driven transformation* or *conferences for systemic educational change*. Rather than allowing often-flawed assessments to continue to drive our teaching, **we must** focus these conversations on pedagogies and curricula. As Gallagher and Turley (2012) make clear, ". . . all the assessment literacy and expertise in the world will not be enough if teachers do not exert *leadership* that places their professional judgment at the center of the educational enterprise" (p. 74, emphasis original). In the memorable words of one of our conference participants who commented on her eagerness for continued conversations like those we had the privilege to listen in on, we encourage all educators to undertake "more of this."

Acknowledgements

This research project was supported with grants from the Alberta Rural Development Network; the Alberta Center for Child, Family and Community Research; and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

References

Alexander, J. (2009). Gaming, student literacies, and the composition classroom: Some possibilities for transformation. *College Composition and Communication*, 61(1), 35-63.

- Beaufort, A. (2007). *College writing and beyond: A new framework for university writing instruction*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Brent, D. (2012). Crossing boundaries: Co-op students relearning to write. *College Composition and Communication*, 63(4), 558-592.
- Broad, B. (2003). *What we really value: Beyond rubrics in teaching and assessing writing*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Cohen, A., & Wollack, J. (2006) Test administration, security, scoring, and reporting. In R. Brennan (Ed.), *Educational measurement, 4th ed.*, (pp. 355-386). Westport, CT: American Council on Education/Praeger.
- Davies, C., & Birbili, M. (2000). What do people need to know about writing in order to write in their jobs? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 48(4), 429-445. doi:10.1111/1467-8527.00156
- Downs, N., & Wardle, E. (2007). Teaching about writing, righting misconceptions: (Re)envisioning first-year composition as introduction to writing studies. *College Composition and Communication*, 58(4), 552-584.
- Duncum, P. (2004). Visual culture isn't just visual: Multiliteracy, multimodality and meaning. *Studies in Art Education*, 45(3), 252-264. doi:10.2307/1320972
- Fisher, R., & Engelman, J. (2009). *Factors affecting attrition at a Canadian college*. Canadian Council on Learning. Retrieved from <http://www.google.ca/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CCcQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ccl-cca.ca%2Fpdfs%2FFundedResearch%2FFisher-ExSum-En.pdf&ei=th9WVf-gDtOwyAT-7IGwBA&usq=AFQjCNHqMeFauWbACUe-SRUawDY4MK6lJg&bvm=bv.93564037,d.aWw>
- Gallagher, C., & Turley, E. (2012). *Our better judgment: Teacher leadership for writing assessment*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- George, D. (2002). From analysis to design: Visual communication in the teaching of writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 54(1), 11-39. doi:10.2307/1512100
- Government of Alberta. (2010). *Inspiring education: A dialogue with Albertans*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education.
- Hacker, D. J., Keener, M. C., & Kircher, J. C. (2009). Writing is applied metacognition. In D. J. Hacker, J. Dunlosky, & A. C. Graesser (Eds.), *Handbook of metacognition in education*. New York: Routledge.
- Hillocks, G., Jr. (2002). *The testing trap: How states writing assessments control learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2007). Researching new literacies: Web 2.0 practices and insider perspectives. *E-Learning*, 4(3), 224-240.
- Leu, D., Slomp, D., Corrigan, J., & Zawilinski, L. (in press). New literacies and writing. In C. A. MacArthur, S. Graham, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds), *Handbook of writing research (2nd Ed.)*. New York: Guilford Publications.
- Lewis, C., & Fabos, B. (2005). Instant messaging, literacies, and social identities. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 40(4), 470-501.
- Lewison, M., & Heffernan, L. (2008). Rewriting writers' workshop: Creating safe spaces for disruptive stories. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 42(4), 435-465. doi:10.2307/40171811
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-92.
- Purves, A. C. (1985). Apologia not accepted. *College Composition and Communication* 46(4) 28-43.
- Roozen, K. (2010). Tracing trajectories of practice: Repurposing in one student's developing disciplinary writing processes. *Written Communication*, 27(3), 318-354. doi:10.1177/0741088310373529
- Slomp, D. (2008). Harming not helping: The impact of a Canadian standardized writing assessment on curriculum and pedagogy. *Assessing Writing*, 13, 180-200.
- Slomp, D. (2012). Challenges in assessing the development of writing ability: Theories, constructs and

- methods. *Assessing Writing*, 17, 81-91.
- Smit, D. (2004). *The end of composition studies*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Sommers, N., & Saltz, L. (2004). The novice as expert: Writing the freshman year. *College Composition and Communication*, 56(1), 124-149. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4140684>
- Wardle, E. (2007). Understanding 'transfer' from FYC: Preliminary results of a longitudinal study. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 31(1-2), 65-85.
- Wardle, E. (2009). 'Mutt genres' and the goal of FYC: Can we help students write the genres of the university? *College Composition and Communication*, 60(4), 765-789.
- Wardle, E., & Roozen, K. (2012). Addressing the complexity of writing development: Toward an ecological model of assessment. *Assessing Writing*, 17(2), 106-119.
- White, E. M., Elliot, N., & Peckham, I. (2015). *The assessment of writing programs: Very like a whale*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Wiggins, G. (1990). *The case for authentic assessment*. Retrieved from <http://eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED328611.pdf>
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2009). Damsels in discourse: Girls consuming and producing identity texts through Disney princess play. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(1), 57-83. doi:10.2307/20304573

Note

1 Archived blogs can be found at: <http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/conversations/>

David Slomp is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge where he co-directs the Masters in Education program in Curriculum and Assessment. His research focuses on the social consequences of writing assessment practices.

Roger Graves is Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, Professor in English and Film Studies, and Interim Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at the University of Alberta. His research focuses on writing assignments across the university and the use of gamification strategies to teach writing.

Bob Broad started his career teaching secondary English in Vermont and Washington, D.C., USA. He is now a Professor of English at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois. Bob also runs Just Words Consulting Group, working with schools, colleges, universities, and other organizations to help them discover, illuminate, negotiate, transform, and publish what they value.

Appendix A: A Problem-solving Framework for Writing Instruction

Metacognitive Knowledge

Metacognition involves both the monitoring and control functions of cognitive processes. In the context of writing, it refers to the capacity to make purposeful choices about the crafting of text. It also involves the capacity to critically reflect upon and refine those choices and the processes through which they are engaged. Contemporary metacognitive theory acknowledges the situated nature of cognition, meaning the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and broader contextual factors shape our thinking, decision-making, and choices. Today's writers need to develop strong metacognitive abilities because these are what sustain a problem-solving orientation toward writing and learning to write. There is a metacognitive dimension to each facet of conceptual knowledge discussed in the sections below. For this reason, Hacker, Keener and Kircher (2009) define writing ability as *applied metacognition*.

Conceptual Knowledge about Writing

There are a number of frameworks for describing conceptual knowledge about writing (Beaufort, 2007; Smit, 2004; White, Elliot, & Peckham, 2015). Although each model has its respective insights, we draw predominately on Beaufort's transfer-oriented model, which describes five conceptual knowledge domains that writers draw on when engaging in writing. This model supports a view of writing as a problem-solving activity. Beaufort describes each of the five knowledge domains (listed below), which contributes to making sense of the problem that needs to be solved.

Discourse community knowledge. "A Discourse community is a social group that communicates at least in part via written texts and shares common goals, values, and writing standards, a specialized vocabulary and specialized genres" (Beaufort, 2007, p. 179). Discourse community knowledge involves one's ability to understand and respond to the values and expectations of the communities within which or for which one is writing. Each discourse community holds different expectations for how a writer will handle specific subject matter, rhetorical choices, genre features, and process expectations. A writer's ability to reach or integrate into a given discourse community is in part dependent on the ability to meet the community's expectations and to reflect its values (Alexander, 2009). An important aspect of learning to write involves the process of becoming socialized into particular communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Wohlwend, 2009). As this socialization occurs, writers gain insider understandings of what those communities value and how to craft texts that respond to those values (Lankshear & Knoble, 2007). Learning how to identify and analyze the expectations and values of multiple discourse communities then becomes an essential skill for today's writers.

Rhetorical knowledge. Texts are designed to deliver a broad range of intentions, including intentions to persuade, inform, entertain, imagine, explore, or evoke. Rhetorical knowledge involves developing an understanding of the tools or choices available to writers as they attempt to deliver on their desired intention. Within Beaufort's model, rhetorical knowledge also includes one's ability to understand which rhetorical devices or tools will be most effective in reaching the discourse community for whom the text was written. Today's writers need to understand not only how to deliver on intentions through their choice and

organization of words on a page but also through the choice and design of images, sounds, and spaces (both virtual and concrete), and more challenging still, through the integration and juxtaposition of design choices across these available modalities (Duncum, 2004; George, 2002; Lewison & Heffernan, 2008; New London Group, 1996).

Genre knowledge. Genres are context specific, complex, and recurring tools used to accomplish work central to a discourse community. Genres signal insider status, structure ideas in expected ways, establish interactional patterns within communities, and evolve in response to group needs and behaviors. They “make sense to the people who create, use, and change them, but they are difficult, if not impossible, to teach people to write out of context” (Wardle, 2009, p. 768). Acquiring specific genre knowledge is a difficult task because the range of genres one might be expected to write is significant. This is all the more challenging because genres such as the academic essay (which are often taught as if they are static and standardized across disciplines) are highly varied in subtle ways that reflect the specific needs of the discourse communities in which they operate. Additionally, genres evolve to meet the changing needs of the specific discourse communities for whom they are designed.

Genre knowledge, as Beaufort defines it, is not limited to acquiring the capacity to create texts that meet the expectations of specific genres (though this is important); more importantly, it involves developing the capacity to analyze the function of various discourse communities. Students need to understand what genres are used within a specific community, what purposes are served by those genres, and how those genres have been shaped to respond to the needs and values of that community. Developing genre knowledge involves acquiring the capacity to design texts that enact the knowledge acquired through such an analysis of discourse communities.

Writing process knowledge. Writing process knowledge involves understanding the skills, strategies, and processes involved in the creation of text. Historically, much of the focus on writing process knowledge tended to focus on individual writers. Recent research, however, focuses on the social practices of writing. The ethos that emerges from collaborative writing platforms and within the communities that use them redefines writing process knowledge in terms of a participatory process model (Lankshear & Knoble, 2007). The capacity to understand the values and attitudes of the discourse community in which one is functioning is essential for effectively engaging in collaborative processes. Failure to understand the ethos of the discourse community, Alexander (2009) illustrates, can lead to exclusion from that community. Today’s writers, then, also need to understand how to function effectively within the ethos of the communities in which they are writing.

Subject matter knowledge. Developing subject matter knowledge involves gaining an understanding of both the content one is writing about and the perspective one’s audience takes on that subject matter. Writers also need to understand how to utilize their audience’s perspectives on the subject matter and to deliver their own intentions for the text.

Appendix B: An Example of a Problem-solving Writing Task

Context

Over the past decade, the city of Calgary has been growing rapidly. New neighborhoods have been springing up around the city. While roads, utility lines, and green spaces have accompanied this development, few new parks and playgrounds in public spaces have been developed in these new neighborhoods.

Writing Task

Your task is to work in small groups to develop a proposal to convince Calgary City Council to adopt a commitment to developing and implementing a Playgrounds and Recreation Plan for the city of Calgary. You have 4 weeks to prepare your proposal.

Process Guide

To assist you in crafting your proposal, you must work through the process guide below. This guide is designed to enable you to activate and acquire the information and understanding you will need to figure out how to craft a successful proposal.

1. Developing Discourse Community Knowledge

For this task, your discourse community is tightly defined as the members of Calgary City Council. **First**, brainstorm a list of information you would need **about each member of City Council** that would enable you to successfully convince them to support your proposal (e.g. election platform, voting patterns). **Second**, develop a research plan that would enable you to gather the information you identified in the first step. Fill out this information in the chart below. Where possible, be sure to link information required with your research plan. Before enacting your research plan, **complete** the reflection question below.

Information Required	Research Plan

Reflection: How will the information identified help you to successfully complete your task?

--

2. Developing Genre Knowledge

For this task, you will **first** need to identify common genres that accompany presentations to Calgary City Council. **Next**, you will need to analyze samples of these texts. This analysis should identify typical content (e.g. salutations, formal moves), structural features (e.g. length, organizational structures, use of headings,) and linguistic features of these texts (e.g. diction, sentence length/complexity). **Finally**, extrapolate from these features to identify qualities in communication that this discourse community values. Complete this task by filling out the chart below.

Information needed for this task can be found at the following website:
<http://agendaminutes.calgary.ca/sirepub/meetresults.aspx>. In addition to surveying the agendas of several council meetings (the documents you will be analyzing will be embedded in the agenda) you should also refer to the document titled *Communicating with Council and Committees* (this document can be found along the left hand margin).

Complete the following chart using the directions above.

Genre type	Rhetorical Purpose	Typical Content	Structural Features	Linguistic Features	Values

Reflection: Based on your analysis, what are the key genre features and qualities your proposal needs to demonstrate in order to be successful.

3. Developing Rhetorical Knowledge

For this task you will **first** need to select two of the documents you reviewed in **Step 2 (Developing Genre Knowledge)** of this process guide. The documents you pick should be from the genre you will most likely use in your proposal. **Next**, for each of these documents complete a Says/Does analysis in the chart below (see handout, *Introduction to Says/Does Analysis*):

- For each paragraph write one sentence that describes what the paragraph says. A *says* sentence summarizes the meaning or message of the paragraph.
- For each paragraph write a number of sentences that describe the paragraph’s function, that is, what the paragraph is trying to do or accomplish (For example: “This paragraph introduces the topic by using a humorous anecdote” or “This paragraph brings up an objection that some readers might feel and then tries to answer that objection”). The key to writing *does* sentences is to keep them different from the *says* sentences. Do not focus on **what** is said. Focus on **how and why** it was said.

The purpose of a says/does analysis is to help you develop an understanding of the rhetorical moves an author makes in order to achieve his/her purpose. **Finally**, once you have completed your says/does analysis, write a brief reflection on what rhetorical moves you plan to adopt in your proposal.

Says	Does

Reflection: What were the most effective rhetorical moves (does statements) you identified in your analysis? What rhetorical moves will you need to use in your proposal?

--

4. Developing Subject Matter Knowledge

To be successful, every strong proposal is dependent on solid content. For this task, your job is to **first** brainstorm a list of the content or information (e.g. demographic information, costs, research on the benefits of neighborhood playgrounds) you will need to include in your proposal. **Second**, develop a research plan that would enable you to gather the information that you identified. Fill out this information in the chart below. Where possible, be sure to link information required with your research plan. Before enacting your research plan, **complete** the reflection question below.

Information Required	Research Plan

Reflection: How will the information identified help you to successfully complete your task? What information do you believe Calgary City Council will find most compelling? Why?

--

5. Activating Writing Process Knowledge

The task that you have been asked to complete is a complex one. This complexity is enhanced by the collaborative nature of the task. Defining a process or plan to complete this task will be important to your success. Equally important will be for your group to develop a set of shared expectations for how tasks will be divided amongst group members and for how tasks will be completed.

- Step one: Brainstorm a list of tasks that your group will need to complete for this proposal.
- Step two: Organize your list of tasks in roughly sequential order (some task elements may run parallel to one another).
- Step three: Decide who will take responsibility for each task.
- Step four: Develop a set of expectations/principles for how your group will make decisions about the proposal, how group members will complete their assigned tasks, and how individuals will be held accountable for their work.
- Step five: Reflect on group decisions.

Task Description	Expected Completion Date	Task Responsibility

Expectations/Principles for Collaboration

Reflection: What process-related problems do you anticipate? What are measures you can take to avoid or mitigate those problems?