

Article

# Introduction: Special Issue on Teaching Academic Writing in Canada

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## Introduction

We would like to begin by thanking everyone who contributed to this Special Issue: the authors, whose exciting work we'll discuss below; the reviewers, many of whom were exceedingly generous with their time; and the outgoing Editors of *Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie*, Kim Mitchell and Sean Zwagerman. We are pleased to have this opportunity to extend particular thanks to Kim, who graciously provided behind-the-scenes support throughout the entire process of editing this Special Issue. Finally, we would like to thank Julia Kiernan of Lawrence Technological University, who first developed the idea for this Special Issue several years ago. While she ultimately stepped away to focus on other projects, this Special Issue would not exist without her crucial early contributions.

In our Call for Proposals (which was circulated before the release of ChatGPT-3 in November of 2022), we invited scholars to submit proposals for articles that explored Canadian approaches to academic writing. We were specifically interested in scholarship that was cross-disciplinary and that shared writing pedagogies that could be adapted for different institutional contexts. Perhaps most importantly, we encouraged submissions that focused on the following pedagogical circumstances: location and place; work within and between disciplines and departments; and writing-related knowledge transfer. We specified these issues because, to our understanding, the history of academic writing instruction in Canada has made these some of the more pressing challenges confronting writing instructors today.

As we noted in that CFP, Canadian approaches to academic writing have often been framed in contrast to similar knowledge work being undertaken in the U.S. As most readers of this Special Issue will know, Canadian approaches to teaching academic writing have evolved in ways that are quite unique from American approaches to writing studies. For evidence of this, one need look no further than Graves and Graves' (2006) landmark collection of essays that examined the "baffling variety of writing courses, centres, programs, and degrees offered at Canadian universities" (p. 1), each of which was designed to meet the unique needs of its institution and bore little resemblance to what would typically be found in the United States. Accordingly, the articles in this issue build on scholarship that has examined trends in Canadian writing instruction and mapped out the intellectual terrain of those who teach, study, and support writing within the Canadian context.

In conceptualizing this Special Issue, we were interested in learning more about the Canadian approaches to teaching academic writing across different contexts. Despite the wide array of topics suggested by the call for this Special Issue (e.g., plurilingualism, remote teaching and learning, first-year writing courses and the concept of transfer), submissions emphasised two major trends on the Canadian landscape of academic writing: (a) movement towards the decolonization of academic writing in both scholarship and teaching (e.g., Brydon, 2016; Fladd & Marken, 2019) with a particular emphasis on Indigenous voices (i.e., Indigenous ways of being and doing) and (b) how approaches to writing in the disciplines (WID) and to writing centre practice continue to influence knowledge creation (e.g., Procter, 2011).

Vis-à-vis the decolonization of the writing curricula, Prescott-Brown suggests small-scale changes such as the introduction of a multimodal writing task to implement decolonial and antiracist pedagogies in writing classrooms, whereas Toorenburgh and Gaudet demonstrate the impact of indigenizing a first-year writing course to better support this specific population of students. Their work has gone beyond ensuring students' improved academic performance to also promoting a sense of belonging—a crucial factor for student success, retention, and mental health (e.g., Gopalan & Brady, 2019; Strayhorn, 2018).

In addition, the profound impact of WID and writing centre practices on inclusion and knowledge creation emerged in several contributions to this Special Issue. For example, Natarajan argues that writing centres are the exact spaces to revolutionize how writing is perceived particularly by the traditionally White leadership. Bell et al. demonstrate precisely this as they present the writing centre as a space that brought together a writing centre director, a librarian, and an academic writing specialist in an effort to make their website more welcoming and approachable by integrating

Western and Indigenous approaches. Wright-Taylor, in addition, argues for cross-disciplinary collaborations wherein writing curricula become insulated from neo-imperialist influences.

Cournoyea et al., on the other hand, suggest that writing centres can and *should* become hubs where graduate student writers can not only pursue individual writing goals but also bond and build communities of practice regardless of their disciplines, which can help with overcoming social and academic isolation. Articles in this Special Issue also show us how writing as knowledge creation functions within college curricula (Tremblay et al.), how it may be delimited by university policies (Marcel & Kang), and how it intersects with faculty feelings of self-efficacy (Mitchell). In sum, these articles illustrate how our collective knowledge work builds communities as it cross-cuts theory and practice, which is particularly important given the social, political, and technological uncertainties that characterize contemporary higher education.

## Significance

We see this Special Issue contributing to Canadian Writing Studies through its survey of more recent developments in our field. More broadly, we hope this open access venue enables the dissemination of these ideas to other disciplinary communities across Canadian higher education. Nodding again to Margaret Procter, we know that writing instruction occurs in diverse ways across Canadian curricula, and we believe that sharing our collective expertise more broadly is an important means of fostering instructional alignment across the disciplines.

This is an important pedagogical development because, while writing programs continue to grow (e.g., Science Communication at McMaster University; first-year writing at University of Toronto Mississauga; Communication Arts at University of Waterloo; Writing, Rhetoric, and Communications at University of Winnipeg), there has not been a focused examination of how this growth has complicated approaches to teaching and learning academic writing in more than a decade. Most importantly, the growth of these programs is not only of interest to writing faculty. Writing is a complex cognitive activity, and writing tasks are ubiquitous assessments across the curriculum, as noted in a *University Affairs/affaires universitaires* opinion piece by Andrea Williams (2022). In fact, like Williams, Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle have drawn attention to the fact that writing continues to serve as a vehicle through which knowledge is both generated and demonstrated and to draw the attention of many stakeholders who, regardless of their expertise, weigh in on what “good writing” is, and how it should be taught and learned and by whom, and how that learning should be assessed (2015, p. 6).

This tension is only amplified by the degree to which teaching and learning are increasingly mediated by generative AI, which makes a synthesis of contemporary pedagogical trends and challenges in our field even more timely.

## **Overview of the Special Issue**

The Special Issue starts with Bell, Keenan, and Faerber's article "Truth and Reconciliation through web design: Integrating Indigenist and Western approaches to teaching writing on a writing centre website," which touches on both major trends we identify above: the movement towards the decolonization of academic writing; and how approaches to WID and writing centre practices continue to influence knowledge creation. The ensuing articles engage with at least one of these trends, doing so by exploring topics ranging from first-year writing to writing program policies. Below, we offer two ways of engaging with the Special Issue: a series of editorial descriptions listed alphabetically by first author surname followed by a rhetorical table of contents. Taken together, these articles illustrate how Canadian approaches to teaching and learning academic writing have forged a unique path through their emphasis on the value of Indigenous knowledges, decolonization and antiracism, and community building efforts. We have learned so very much during our work on this project, and we hope this will be true for colleagues and readers within the Canadian writing community and beyond.

Theresa Bell, Caitlin Keenan, and Jonathan Faerber recount the challenges and triumphs (of which there are plenty) they experienced as they reformed their writing centre website by blending Western and Indigenist approaches. One of the many features that make this contribution unique is that, instead of reporting their findings in the traditional Western format and dictating what to take away from their work, these authors adopt an Indigenous story-telling approach which invites readers to join them in a cordial conversation that allows self-reflection. This, in turn, grants readers the agency to take action based on their individual contexts while appreciating Indigenous perspectives and experiences.

Michael Cournoyea, Boba Samuels, and David Calloway foreground the social exigencies, opportunities, and obstacles that encase graduate writing across Canadian higher education. Their article describes a graduate writing group, *Inked: The Health Sciences Writing Collective* at the University of Toronto. In doing so, they illustrate their approach to creating an academic space where graduate student writers feel seen, heard, and in community with one another. *Inked* is an impactful and replicable initiative, which is noteworthy given the documented loneliness of graduate school

(e.g., Kalubi et al., 2020). This initiative also stands out because members of groups like these may become socialized to think more deeply about their writing processes, which will surely have positive trickle-down effects for their own pedagogies, in cases where they go on to become educators across the disciplines.

Faith Marcel and Phoebe Kang present an overview of generative AI and academic integrity policies at Canadian universities. Their survey of publicly accessible university resources at 16 Canadian universities provides educators, researchers, and administrators with a concrete historical baseline from which to analyze and judge future policy-related developments. This snapshot of current policies and documentation lays bare the many challenges and opportunities generative AI presents for faculty, students, and stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning of academic writing in higher education.

Kim Mitchell shares the results of two large survey studies of Canadian faculty members' individual and collective self-efficacy for teaching writing. Her research concludes that faculty members have higher individual than collective self-efficacy and reveals a strong tendency among instructors to blame both students and institutions for students' purported inability to write. She concludes by recommending strategies for changing faculty members' attitudes towards academic writing instruction in higher education.

Srividya Natarajan examines the established tropes that defined American writing centres in the past (e.g., the "Burkean Parlour" and the "fix-it shop in the basement") and explores their impact on writing centre practice. She uses a variety of unconventional writing strategies ranging from poetry to reflection to question the value of these tropes and ultimately propose alternatives that present new ways of thinking about writing pedagogy and the culture of Canadian writing centres as a whole. The article concludes with a call for new frameworks, a new set of pedagogical ground rules, and new staffing models in the writing centre.

Marci Prescott-Brown acknowledges that implementing antiracist and decolonial writing pedagogies can sometimes be perceived as a difficult task, and so she encourages Canadian instructors to engage with micro-level policies as a way of responding to this important call. By way of an example, she provides readers with a concrete and broadly adaptable multi-modal writing task (i.e., involving reading, writing, listening, and speaking) that can be utilized in various learning contexts. The author concludes with illuminating insights from students as to the feasibility of and gains from this writing task.

Lydia Toorenburgh and Lauren Gaudet share the process and the outcome of an exemplary collaboration between a non-Indigenous faculty and an Indigenous staff, aiming to foster a sense of belonging in and to increase the retention of Indigenous university students via a first-year introductory writing course offered at a Canadian university. Following a detailed report of the survey data on the impact of said writing course, these authors also provide a genuine behind-the-scenes account of their personal experiences throughout a process that was marked by a wide range of emotions from delight to discomfort.

Taunya Tremblay, Jamie Zeppa, Shannon Blake, Kiley Bolton, Katarina Ohlsson, Christine Dalton, Victoria Yeoman, and Lavaughn John, detail the rewards and challenges associated with enacting a full-scale curricular change within a large writing program at the college level. In doing so, they offer an important contribution to our larger understanding of writing-related knowledge transfer. Having collected qualitative data from both students and instructors, the authors paint a positive picture of students' learning experiences and metacognitive capabilities. This article importantly exemplifies the current growth of first-year writing in Canada, as viewed through the lens of teaching for transfer.

Christin Wright-Taylor provides a history of the relationship between composition and applied linguistics within the Canadian Association for Studies in Language and Learning (CASLL), also known as Inkshed. Building on Miriam E. Horne's study of this pioneering organization's development in Writing in a Community of Practice, Wright-Taylor excavates Inkshed's newsletters and conference programs and concludes that Inkshed does not appear to have embraced the same institutional division of labour that has characterized American higher education over the years. She concludes with a discussion of the implications this has for Writing Studies in Canada.

## **Rhetorical Table of Contents**

anti-racism & decolonization: Bell et al.; Prescott-Brown; Natarajan; Toorenburgh & Gaudet

community-building: Bell et al.; Cournoyea et al.; Toorenburgh & Gaudet

writing centre practices & associated implications: Bell et al.; Cournoyea et al.; Marcel & Kang; Mitchell; Natarajan

histories & policies: Marcel & Kang; Mitchell; Natarajan; Wright-Taylor

first-year writing: Toorenburgh & Gaudet; Tremblay et al.

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