

Loose Among the Literati

Wired Writers and the Virtual Practicum

TREVOR OWEN AND SUDHA TAKAKI

REGULAR READERS OF EDUCATION CANADA MAY recall an article in the Fall 2001 issue in which Christine Uy and I reported on one of the ancillary programs of the Writers In Electronic Residence (WIER) program. In that case, we reported how the experience of WIER was extended to include the integration of a substantial collection of contemporary Canadian authors' works into a school library and literature program, and how these were supported by regular face-to-face visits by authors selected from this group. In this article, I am pleased to team up with Sudha Takaki to report on another of WIER's ancillary projects, "The Virtual Practicum," which provides online practice teaching placements to pre-service candidates. WIER offered its first virtual practicum in 1989 through the former Faculty of Education, University of Toronto, and has since expanded to include programs at several institutions; other initiatives have appeared elsewhere, developing notions of what virtual practica might be.

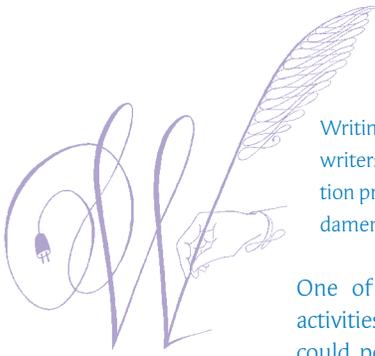
Takaki participated in WIER through OISE/UT's "Internship Program," which involves pre-service candidates in experiences beyond the institution. She worked online

alongside students, teachers and professional writers in one of WIER's 12-week terms for secondary schools, reading and responding to student writing and encouraging interaction, critical reflection and debate. She also worked closely with writers and teachers in a "staff room" conference that WIER maintains each session, and considered how WIER might inform her notions of learning and teaching practice as they were emerging in her traditional school-based placements.

Readers who are active in online learning and teacher education will note familiar themes in Takaki's experiences and questions: writing as a means of learning, learning teams, mentorship, personal practical knowledge and "learning at the elbows,"¹ reflection and communities of practice and inquiry, the influence of these communities on others, on innovation, the perils of "imposed orthodoxy,"² and online learning among them. She returns to writing before discovering these multiple points of entry, including what might best be described as more traditional – what I see as skills-oriented and tools-based – notions of technology and learning:

THERE WAS NO SENSE OF COMPETITION – JUST A PASSION AND RESPECT FOR WRITING. EVEN THE YOUNGEST OF THE BUDDING WRITERS SHARED THIS SENSE OF OPENNESS AND HONESTY.





Writing is not only a cognitive and expressive process in which writers put their thoughts into writing; it is also a communication process involving readers as well as writers – writing is fundamentally a social act.³

One of my assignments investigated telecollaborative activities for teachers and students. In my search for one I could potentially use in my future career as a teacher, I came across WIER, which Judi Harris categorizes as a “peer feedback” activity:

WIER became the focus of my assignment. This paper is about the learning that occurred during my Internship – learning that couldn’t have happened in any classroom, but that could be applied to any classroom.

Takaki’s initial notions of technology signal familiar understandings; the popular (though insufficient) metaphor of the “tool,” with its focus on skill acquisition, can be seen in her embrace of Harris’ description of WIER as “adding telementoring to peer feedback,” forming a kind of “telecollaboration.” And yet, although metaphors help us understand the things we don’t know by associating them with the things we do,⁵ they also tend to emphasize the new,⁶ or perhaps the not yet known aspects of new concepts over more familiar others – consider how “horseless carriage” enabled the idea of “automobile,” for instance; paperless office, television, or even Harris’ notion of telecollaboration provide other examples. Certainly, WIER is a program rooted in the use of technology to enhance collaboration; however, it is important to understand that the more “dis-

tant” or technologically-enabled experiences of WIER are normally mediated locally, in face-to-face classrooms, among familiar others. The presence of the online “other” – writers, certainly, but also the writing (and written) communities that develop around them – creates conditions in which all participants encounter one another as “learning colleagues”⁷ in the shared learning context of WIER’s “electronic residency,” as Takaki discovers.

WIER’S WORLD

As much as I was passionate about my Internship, I found out quickly that everyone else at WIER shared that passion – even the writers. One published writer was still in awe of another published writer!

There was no sense of competition – just a passion and respect for writing. Even the youngest of the budding writers shared this sense of openness and honesty. In fact, it was surprising to know that students were open to criticism when it meant an improvement in their work – they couldn’t wait to read what their peers had to say about their writing.

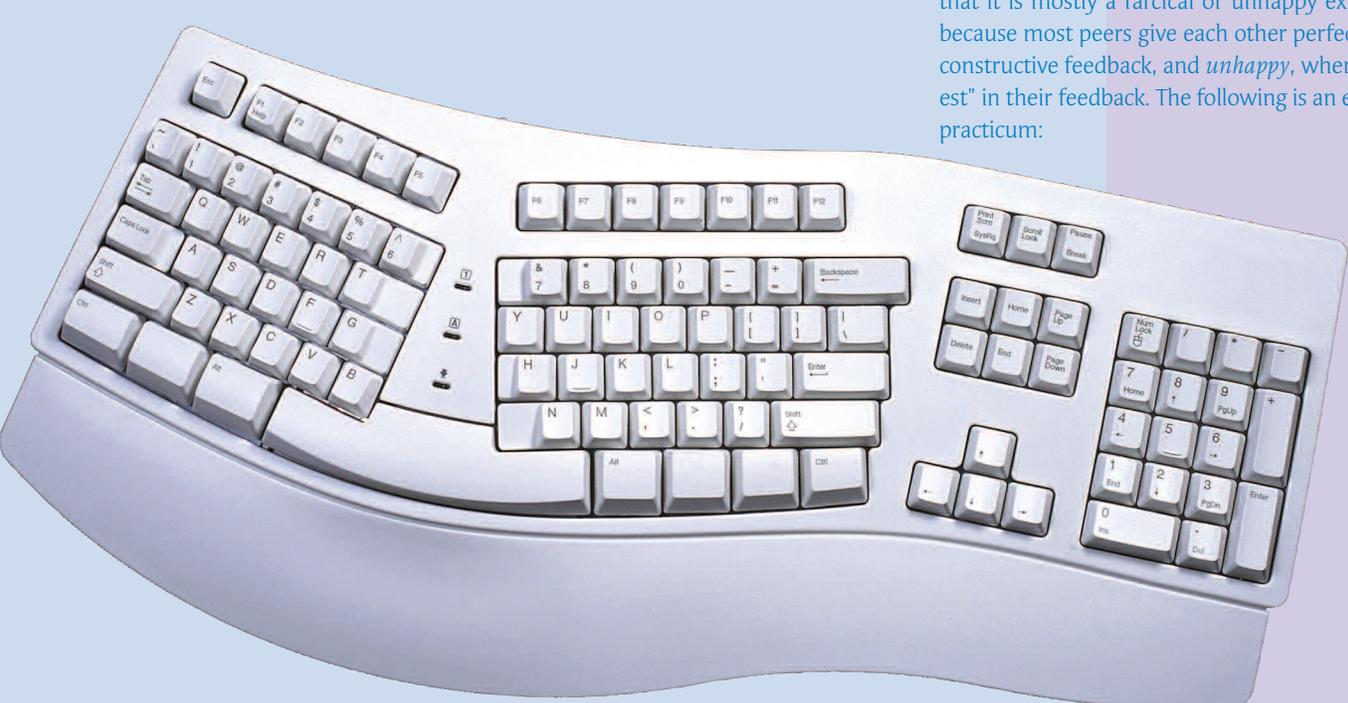
For pre-service candidates, entry into this community admits them to what MacKinnon calls “learning to teach at the elbows,” developing a kind of “teaching manner” through “a form of apprenticeship-learning that occurs at the side of someone who is proficient in the practice being acquired,” and it is here – in what MacKinnon casts as a “studio” and WIER constructs as the “electronic residency” – that Takaki finds some remedy for the issues, consequent problems and ideas she considers. These include concerns about peer feedback, and particularly peer evaluation activities, which reveal the kinds of “distortion” Willinsky describes, when providing evidence that one has complied with a method transcends the method’s purposes, creating a kind of “imposed orthodoxy.”⁸

A RECIPROCITY EMERGES IN THIS SETTING AS ALL PARTICIPANTS

LEARN AT ONE ANOTHER’S “ELBOWS.”

FROM WIER TO WHERE: PEER FEEDBACK

I experienced peer feedback often at high school, and again at OISE/UT. Although I haven’t conducted any studies on its effects, I am inclined to believe from personal experience that it is mostly a farcical or unhappy experience: *farcical* because most peers give each other perfect marks without constructive feedback, and *unhappy*, when peers are “honest” in their feedback. The following is an example from my practicum:



Sample: 48 students from two university preparation English classes

Scenario: Group Feedback using rubrics to assess performances of scenes from Hamlet

Responses: 51

Results: Perfect Marks [20/20] 20/51 = 39%
Comments [three words or more] 20/51 = 39%

It was interesting that only ten per cent (2/20) of the perfect marks had accompanying comments. All other comments were found on the lowest scores. Somehow, feedback from peers is deemed invalid or unfair. An obvious reason for this is that peer feedback is usually paired with peer evaluation; a less obvious reason is that students rarely receive training in providing feedback.

Not surprisingly, I found the peer feedback aspect of WIER most interesting. If it is so challenging to implement it in a classroom, how does one implement this on a national scale? As a future teacher, it was of utmost importance to me to learn how WIER makes it work.

I began to think of “3Rs” for useful peer feedback – Read, Respond and Revise – and that one must do all three – read a piece, respond to it and revise the response – before the intended reads it. What I found fascinating was that the evaluation component of peer feedback could be applied to the feedback itself, shifting a focus from evaluating work by peers to evaluating how constructive and useful feedback is to others.

EN BREF Writers in Electronic Residence (WIER) a élaboré un « stage virtuel » de formation préalable qui fonctionne en conjonction avec le système traditionnel de placement en salle de classe et qui permet à l'organisme de jouer un rôle explicite dans le domaine de la formation pédagogique, en créant une espèce de studio en ligne pour les communautés d'apprenants. L'étudiante-maître Sudha Takaki estime que l'expérience lui a été bénéfique et lui a permis de mieux comprendre l'écriture, l'enseignement, l'apprentissage, la technologie et tout particulièrement le processus de la rétroaction. Grâce au stage virtuel, les enseignants voient leur métier sous un nouveau jour, à mesure que les expériences en ligne influencent leur pratique en classe; les écrivains prennent conscience de l'influence de leur travail de mentorat sur leur profession d'auteur; et les élèves – ainsi que les étudiants-maîtres – découvrent que le fait de travailler avec d'autres personnes engagées dans le processus éducatif améliore leur apprentissage.

I “SHADOWED” THE WRITERS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT

FEEDBACK. I LEARNED THAT FEEDBACK HAS A DISTINCT

PERSONALITY OF ITS OWN, REFLECTING THE PERSON GIVING IT,

REVEALING EXPERIENCES AND PREFERENCES.

Like Britton's notion of “expertise”⁹ and Connelly and Clandinin's “personal practical knowledge”,¹⁰ MacKinnon's “manner” is present in Takaki's thoughts about WIER. All participants undertake practices in which, *at the level of interest, they are already proficient*, and experience this shared interest at one another's “elbows” – online and in classrooms. This applies as much to students and teachers

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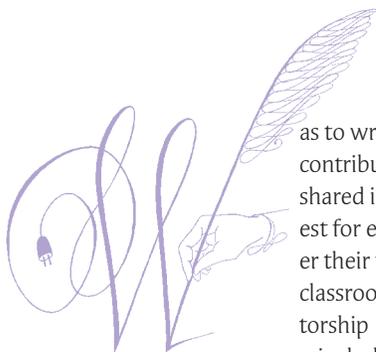
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as to writers, establishing a certain legitimacy to one's own contributions to, and investments in, creating arenas of shared interest and involvement. It is a "professional" interest for each of the constituencies involved: teachers consider their teaching in new ways, as online experiences inform classroom practices; writers consider the influence of mentorship on writing as a professional practice; and students – including student teachers – consider how the practice of learning implicates them as legitimate informants on their own education, working in proximity to others who are also actively engaged in the work.

SUBJECTIVITY AND “MULTIPLICITY OF VOICE”

Part of my Internship required me to provide feedback to the students. I realized it was challenging, and I wondered about a teacher's subjectivity. How does a teacher overcome subjectivity? I posted my query in WIER's Staff Room conference, and one of the writers, Pamela Mordecai, put it in perspective for me:

“It's all you have,” she wrote. “All that matters is that you offer it as just that – your point of view.”

WIER students have the benefit of what Trevor calls “multiplicity of voice” – they get several points of view. How does one duplicate this environment in a classroom? A teacher's should not be the only voice students hear in a classroom – they should be encouraged to listen to each other. As the WIER Teacher Moderator, Marlene Bourdon-King, so aptly put it:

(It) is wonderful reinforcement for the students that audience is as individual as they are, and that their writing will therefore have different effects on different people. Often, the student responses are the most satisfying to them, because they discover that their “target audience” has heard them. This is not to say the adult perspective is unwelcome or off-target – it is simply that, sometimes, our perspective is a little irrelevant, and that's okay.

I used WIER's Staff Room for questions I had for the writers, and to seek guidance from the Teacher Moderator. I was fortunate to be invited to observe how WIER works in a classroom, and it was great to see the other side of “telecollaboration.” Marlene had some 80 students participating from her school in Toronto. It was not surprising to see that they preferred working in the computer room to

working in their classroom; they definitely enjoyed being part of WIER. I also found out that it is a lot of work for a teacher.

A reciprocity emerges in this setting as all participants learn at one another's “elbows.” Takaki's surprise that “even published writers” could still be “in awe” of other published writers underscores the value of pursuing prospects for this reciprocity within communities of learners. For her part, Takaki has taken the opportunity to explore and reciprocate, both in WIER, and in her thoughts here.

Teachers have explored this “awe” before, as Sandra Hawkins did in her reflections on the changed learning relationships she experienced at her school in Williams Lake: “Suddenly,” she wrote in the early days of WIER, “teachers get credibility after years and years of useless circling errors in insulting red,” adding, “I have some of my best discussions with students online. Their comments surprise me and they seem to feel the same about some of the comments I make here.” Writers, like poet Susan Musgrave, also experience this sense of awe: “Every year there is work in WIER I admire – stories and poems I wish I'd written myself.”

EXPERT FEEDBACK

WIER provides opportunities for students and teachers to watch writers in action and to learn from that experience. As much as a teacher can use professional judgment to provide feedback on creative pieces, it is not the same as receiving it from someone who is immersed in, and struggles with, the creative process on a daily basis. Obviously, this sort of environment cannot be replicated in a regular classroom.

So, what's a teacher to do? Having “seen” WIER online and offline, what have I learned? Is there anything I could use in my own classroom?

I “shadowed” the writers to learn more about feedback. I learned that feedback has a distinct personality of its own, reflecting the person giving it, revealing experiences and preferences. Providing feedback is challenging to anyone, especially when the work is creative and personal. When teachers provide feedback, they could create their own networks of expert feedback. Students could decide what constitutes an “expert” – it could be as simple as a group of teachers or senior students.

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DISCOVER CEDAR GLEN

WIER's virtual practicum signals the value of, and need for, identifying and supporting shared professional interests – including those articulated across learning communities, comprising different aspirations within shared contexts. The program links WIER explicitly to teacher education, developing and enhancing the kinds of "apprenticeship-learning" MacKinnon describes within WIER's "electronic residency," creating a kind of online "studio" setting for communities of learners.

WIER's aspirations for the program have been modest, responding more to particular than general interests in teacher education; however, these have nurtured broader initiatives, bridging pre-service and in-service programs through mentorship, critical reflection and inquiry. WIER remains interested in developing the virtual practicum, and invites interested teacher educators and programs to make contact. |

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SUDHA TAKAKI began teaching online for Canada College after graduating from OISE/UT in 2004.

Notes

- 1 A. MacKinnon, "Learning to Teach at the Elbows: The Tao of Teaching," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 12, no. 6 (1996): 653-664.
- 2 John Willinsky, *The New Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 3 Martin Nystrand, "On Teaching Writing as a Verb Rather Than as a Noun: Research on Writing for High School English Teachers." in *Literacy and Its Teaching*. Ed. Gail B. Hawisher and Anne O. Soter. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990. 144-58.
- 4 Judith Harris, "Curriculum-Based Telecollaboration: Using Activity Structures to Design Student Projects," *Learning and Leading with Technology* (September 1998): 12.
- 5 Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1963).
- 6 D. Schön, "Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem-setting in Social Policy" in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed., A. Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 7 Trevor Owen and Christine Uy, "Learning to Select Enter: The Necessary Shifts from High Tech to High Teach," *Education Canada* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 40-43.
- 8 Willinsky, 39.
- 9 J. Britton, "On Writing as a Means of Learning" (speech to the Toronto Board of Education, Language Study Centre, Toronto, 1980).
- 10 M. Connelly and J. Clandinin, *Teachers as Curriculum Planners* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988).



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