

TREVOR OWEN WITH JENNIFER LEWINGTON

WiER

An Innovative Online Writers' Salon Marks 20-plus Years

DESPITE ENORMOUS CHANGES IN TECHNOLOGY,
OCCASIONAL BUREAUCRATIC INDIFFERENCE AND
INTERMITTENT FINANCIAL CHALLENGES, WiER HAS
REMAINED TRUE TO THE SIMPLE NOTION OF AN
ELECTRONIC WRITING SALON FOR STUDENTS
AND AUTHORS.

IN 1983, A BRIGHT STUDENT AT MY ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL in Toronto gave me an early lesson in technology.

"This is a modem," said Matthew, drawing a small square on a piece of paper. Beside it, he drew a large circle. "And this is the world." His demonstration inspired me to buy my first computer and modem, setting off events that led me to found Writers in Electronic Residence (WiER) five years later.

WiER is an educational and arts initiative that uses technology to connect students, teachers and Canadian authors as members of a creative writing community. Through on-line discussions that allow for a lively multi-party or many-to-many exchange, students and teachers in the classroom work with published poets, novelists, and story-tellers. Mentored by established authors, students discover their own voice and the power of writing, while the professionals gain direct access to a new generation of readers.

Over the past two decades, WiER has blossomed into a national organization with the support of many groups — The Writer's Trust, the Canadian Education Association, and faculties of education — and dedicated individuals including classroom teachers, writers, and the students themselves. Despite enormous changes in technology, occasional bureaucratic indifference, and intermittent financial challenges, WiER has remained true to the simple notion of an electronic writing salon for students and authors.

My first exposure to the potential of online communities was *SwiftCurrent*, an electronic literary magazine founded in the mid-1980s by then-York University professor Frank Davey. In the project, published authors and readers (who paid an annual subscription fee) talked to each other about new literary works.

What if students were given the same opportunity?

IN EARLY DAYS, ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY WAS LIMITED

My early efforts to develop an online writing program failed, as I struggled to make connections between the classroom and the arts community using technology. My focus was on using computers to enable new forms of learning; school board technology experts had their eye on the practicalities of installing equipment and administering payroll and budgets.

In the interim, I recruited interested teachers and their students to take part in pilot projects with *SwiftCurrent*. Students would post queries to the writers in an e-mail, like letters to the editor of a newspaper, in hopes of receiving a reply from the authors.



You are free to reproduce, distribute and transmit this article, provided you attribute the author(s), Education Canada Vol. 49 (5), and a link to the Canadian Education Association (www.cea-ace.ca) 2010. You may not use this work for commercial purposes. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. Publication ISSN 0013-1253.

EN BREF Depuis son origine il y a plus de 20 ans à titre d'initiative en éducation et en arts utilisant la technologie pour relier des élèves, des enseignants et des auteurs canadiens en tant que membres d'une communauté d'écriture créative, le programme Writers in Electronic Residence (WiER) a connu d'énormes changements technologiques, une indifférence bureaucratique occasionnelle et des soucis financiers. Aujourd'hui, l'organisme national profite du soutien de plusieurs regroupements, dont la Société d'encouragement aux écrivains du Canada, l'Association canadienne d'éducation et des facultés d'éducation. En une vingtaine d'années, des milliers d'élèves d'écoles canadiennes ont participé à des discussions en ligne, à des balados et à des conférences interactives sur l'écriture avec des auteurs canadiens estimés : Susan Musgrave, Lawrence Hill, Katherine Govier, George Elliott Clarke et d'autres encore.

On one occasion, author David McFadden replied to a Toronto student, much to the amazement of his school. The experience proved to me there was merit in the online medium.

From there, I recruited more authors to work with students. But it was B.C. poet Lionel Kearns who helped WiER take wing. His wife, Gerri Sinclair, was an education professor at Simon Fraser University known for her expertise in technology and she invited me to host the project on the university computer system. In 1988, with funding assistance from the Ontario Arts Council's *Creative Artists in Schools* program, WiER was officially launched.

In the early years, WiER faced hurdles.

Some school officials had concerns about "putting kids online" without direct teacher supervision. Access to technology was never easy: when computers were available, teachers had to roll them on dolly carts into staff rooms to secure a phone line for dial-up communications.

There were also inevitable conflicts with school administrators who put a premium on compliance. I recall being laughed out of a district co-ordinator's office because I was not using CD-ROMs, the "innovative technology use" of the day. Some teachers were openly skeptical of their students' ability to develop an online relationship with creative writers. "Oh, our students could never do that," one teacher scoffed (and more recently than you might imagine).

But there were plenty of others in the early days of WiER who saw its potential to nurture students to find their voice, with the support of an online community beyond the walls of the classroom.

STUDENTS CONNECTED WITH CANADA'S BEST-LOVED AUTHORS

Over the past two decades, thousands of students from hundreds of schools across the country have participated in online discussions, podcasts, and interactive writing conferences with some of Canada's best loved authors: Susan Musgrave, Lawrence Hill, Katherine Govier, George Elliott Clarke, and many others. WiER charges \$650 per class per term for 12-week programs at the elementary, middle and high school levels, and all writers are paid for their work.

Not all developments have been positive ones. Some school districts have copied WiER without credit to operate it on a local level or used WiER's materials in clear violation of copyright.

But there also have been positive connections as schools with a reputation for innovation joined WiER in its early years, paving the way for others.

As in the beginning, technology continues to be an enabler. WiER author biographies and student writing samples are freely available at the program's web site. "Wired Writers Podcasts," added this year, offer full-length readings by WiER authors. In the podcasts, the authors explore the influence of mentorship – received and given – on their work as writer. They also read from student work in *The WiER Tap*, an annual online publication of student writing. All the material is available on WiER's web site and on iTunes.

Over the years, the notion of an online community of learners has inspired other projects, such as "Mathematicians in Electronic Residence" and "Composers in Electronic Residence." As well, several American states have adopted WiER-style initiatives, usually through the impetus of institutional champions. By contrast, WiER operates largely through the impetus of inspired teachers in Canada.

In 2008, the program came under the auspices of the Writers in Electronic Residence Foundation, a national, non-profit charity that works with government, business and the not-for-profit sector. |

TREVOR OWEN is founder and program director of Writers in Electronic Residence.

JENNIFER LEWINGTON is Toronto bureau chief for *The Globe and Mail*. Prior to her current assignment, she was the Globe's national education reporter.

Link to WiER website: www.wier.ca


Enhance your **Environmental and Energy** teaching with these **Exciting SEEDS** resources!



Habitat in the Balance

- Support student decision-making skills as they explore issues and perspectives of water, inhabitants, land, and air
- Investigate water and land systems today at: www.seedshabitat.ca



ELS – Energy Literacy Series

- Explore 10 sources of energy at www.seedsenergy.ca
- Updated Petroleum and Wind modules available this winter

FREE Rewards
for all Challenge Participants









Thank you to our sponsors



Write Across Canada

- Environmental Writing Challenge with wildlife sticker incentives
- Students write about the natural world, environmental issues and conservation



Check out what's NEW!
www.seedsfoundation.ca

- Find details on these and more of our great resources and challenges.
- Please tell us what you need for your classroom.