

# Voices from Alberta Writes 2011: The Inaugural Conversation

## Conversation 1: Writing Beyond Schools, Bob Broad

### Why are you here today?

*At the Inaugural Alberta Writes conference, educators said they had come together for a number of reasons:*

#### **To network, socialize, and bridge the gap between educational contexts:**

We wanted to connect to understand our roles as educators in a broader context, and to learn about the contexts in which other teachers work. This includes connection across disciplines as well as teaching levels, from K-12 to post-secondary, special-needs classrooms, and other contexts. The conference offered an opportunity to see the “big picture” of students' entire experiences of learning to write.

Many of us wanted to understand the challenges that our students would face in their educational futures: we wanted to help prepare students for the values and expectations of University writing, in particular. Others amongst us wanted to understand our students' earlier writing experiences: to gauge reasonable expectations of our students' abilities, and distinguish between the skills that they *had* been taught, and the skills that they *should* be taught.

Quite a few of us expressed a desire to brainstorm strategies that could help bridge the gap between high school and university writing and teaching. We discussed several aspects of this goal. Not only were we concerned to understand each others' teaching and writing contexts, we also wanted to discuss how we represent each others' values, expectations, and perspicacities (for example, the idea that university students may be told to “throw out everything they learned in high school English”). We wanted the confidence to reassure our students when they feel unprepared for their upcoming responsibilities. We wanted to think about bridging the gap via curricular reform, again in a variety of contexts. We needed to learn about different forms and formats of writing: *what styles and types of writing and citation are (or have been) available to—and required of—our students? How do these change in different levels and disciplines? How can students be taught writing skills that will serve them across disciplines?*

**To improve writing and pedagogical skills:** Some of us wanted to improve our own writing abilities; to understand what good writing looks like, and “expand our process of writing.” We wanted to learn skills that would be immediately relevant to our classrooms. Some of us wanted to be empowered to counter our nerves and fears about writing, others wanted to better represent our schools and communities—one group mentioned wanting to write a grant that represents the reserve; another pointed out that “writing properly may help schools get more funding.”

We came together to improve our ability to teach writing—to support our students throughout their writing process. We wanted to discuss questions like: *How can we develop great writers from a young age? How can we help students get started, get organized, and get “unstuck” when they need to? How do we help them express themselves with ease and clarity? How do we link changes in content and audience to changes in grammar, voice, and style—and how do we teach complex ideas if students' writing mechanics are poor? How do we meet all the skill levels in the room?* We wanted to strategize teaching writing in a full curriculum, determining essential skills, and ways to “fit them all in” to the time we have. These skills, we realized, also include reading, comprehension, and critical thinking.

We wanted to promote literacy across the curriculum, the importance of writing and communication in every discipline. *What changes should and could be made to curricula; how could we reframe them?*

**To discuss issues with exams and assessments:** We wanted to learn what strategies other educators use in assessing different kinds of students' writing and preparing them for exams. *What are the essential things that students need to know? How do we balance students' need to achieve diplomas etc. (“teaching to the test”) with their overall need to write well? How do we balance success on evaluations with preparation for “post-secondary and real life”? How do we create effective developmental exams, to understand the levels at which we need to teach? As one educator said, “You can only do so much because there are so many different styles and expectations. There are so many formats.”* We also wanted to discuss the relationship between grades and the writing process.

**To address non-academic writing contexts:** *How can we show students ways to apply literacy to their futures whether or not that future includes further formal education?* We wanted to support our students future life skills, happiness, and employability. What forms and genres of writing should we include in our teaching to make our classrooms as relevant as possible?

**To empower students in their experiences of writing:** We wanted to expand our students' ideas about writing, and help them to see the values in their ideas and their writing—maybe even to help them love writing. *How can we integrate writing into more aspects of the teaching process, and help students see writing as necessary to communication?* We want to give all students, including underprivileged students, a voice, and help them to become “comfortable with others hearing their voices and their story.” *How can we give students confidence and put the fun and exploration back into writing?*

**Activity: Reading “Maligne Canyon”**

**What Do You Value in Written Work? What Do You Dislike?**

Participants Liked	Participants Disliked
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Expressive, storytelling language in the first paragraph</li> <li>⤴ Clear effort to pull the information together through use of transitions (therefore, nevertheless etc).</li> <li>⤴ clear visual imagery</li> <li>⤴ informational</li> <li>⤴ Lots of embedded definitions</li> <li>⤴ Well-researched; interesting facts</li> <li>⤴ Integrates the sources into the subject matter (without disrupting the flow of the writing)</li> <li>⤴ Enjoyed mix of creative and scientific writing / word choices</li> <li>⤴ Different aspects of writing are clearly organized by headings</li> <li>⤴ Good combination of empirical and textual research</li> <li>⤴ Few errors; grammatically correct</li> <li>⤴ Brief, direct, clear sentences</li> <li>⤴ Multimedia text: use of a photograph to add layers to the textual description</li> <li>⤴ The writer feels comfortable with research: their writing seems informed, and they have cited their sources.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ No creativity or expressive language in the latter part of the text</li> <li>⤴ No variety in sentences</li> <li>⤴ dull, boring</li> <li>⤴ repetition of adjectives that do not really say much, such as “amazing”</li> <li>⤴ Transition words were sometimes out-of-place; they should not have been so consistently at the beginning of a sentence</li> <li>⤴ Insufficient variation in the location of the transitional words or phrases; bottom half of the first paragraph sentence structures required greater variety.</li> <li>⤴ The creative and scientific elements were insufficiently merged (e.g. the “karst” system could have been defined scientifically in the outset)</li> <li>⤴ At some points the writer is referring to the photograph and at other points the writer is not: it needs consistency; the image and the text didn't always work together, creating confusion for the reader.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Descriptive language; made a complex scientific topic interesting and understandable</li> <li>⤴ Eloquent</li> <li>⤴ Smooth transitions</li> <li>⤴ Style hybridization; poetic “hook” followed by more scientific form</li> <li>⤴ Clear indication of shift in style (through the use of headings and organization)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Wanted more images for the scientific sections of the paper because these were harder to visualize</li> <li>⤴ wording could have been better</li> <li>⤴ genre ambiguity: what is the purpose of the document?</li> <li>⤴ somewhat redundant</li> <li>⤴ Self-disclosure sentences bothered one reader—if the genre is clearer this issue might not be a problem</li> <li>⤴ Inconsistent</li> </ul>
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**Observations:**

- ⤴ The first page felt very personal and descriptive. The second page was more scientific. It felt like some sort of science assignment with observation and then facts.
- ⤴ Consistency is vital for both the writer and the reader.
- ⤴ The way the writing is valued might depend on the personality of the teacher.
- ⤴ It is important to know the purpose, audience, and genre of a document. In what context will it be used?

**Activity: “Marijuana—The Debate Continues”**

Participants Liked	Participants Disliked
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Passion for the subject; the writer is passionate, has strong opinions and ideas</li> <li>⤴ There is a clear, engaging voice; “could hear it spoken aloud”</li> <li>⤴ Declares a strong, argumentative position</li> <li>⤴ Uses a strong persuasive technique</li> <li>⤴ Lots of ideas to rationalize his/her point</li> <li>⤴ The paper is structured well; paragraph structure is strong, with a particular topic for each</li> <li>⤴ Strong use of both negative and positive rhetoric; not simply negative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Spelling, sentence structure and grammar mistakes are difficult to look past &amp; make it difficult to focus on the writer’s ideas</li> <li>⤴ There are far too many ideas being given; need to select and refine ideas</li> <li>⤴ It was challenging to try and link some sentences together</li> <li>⤴ The title invites audience’s own bias; title doesn’t take a stand</li> <li>⤴ The writer speaks in absolutes</li> <li>⤴ Some statements were contradictory to one another (“some arguments like marijuana use is increasing is falsely</li> </ul>

rhetoric (i.e. people who hate marijuana are stupid), but talks about the benefits of marijuana

- ⤴ Recognizes the range of the audience; talking to a general audience; recognize the breadth of their audience (young people and Canadians in general)
- ⤴ Interesting to read; interesting rationale to support argument (though uneven)
- ⤴ good lead-in to thesis
- ⤴ The way they used quotation marks to indicate that they realize the language they are using is being carefully used

based" vs. "there has been a slight increase in marijuana use in the U.S.")

- ⤴ Lots of blanket statements without facts to prove them: when the writer says 'statistics show,' there are no actual statistics given; claims are ungrounded, and seem to lack credibility
- ⤴ Would be useful to use anecdotes and real life stories, as opposed to stats
- ⤴ Insufficient definition / explanation of key terms: implied reader's background knowledge
- ⤴ Lacks personal connection to audience
- ⤴ No organization to the arguments, merely just a list of facts; there needs to be more of a progression from beginning to end. The argument seems fragmented and randomly structured. The points seem "dropped" in.
- ⤴ Ending is too grandiose in terms of its vision of the future (with pot).
- ⤴ Writer seems not to fully understand the complexity of the problems he/she is dealing with. The debate seems to be bigger than the author is aware.

**Observations:** Students need to realize that their writing not just about them. The way the audience interprets the writing is most important.

**Questions:**

- ⤴ What do we value in writing?
- ⤴ To what extent is our reaction to different pieces of writing subjective?
- ⤴ Do we feel strong and consistent in our ability to respond to and assess writing—both positively and critically?

**Conversation 2: Robin Bright, Leah Fowler**  
**What are the qualities that you value in your own writing?**

**Formal and Mechanical Correctness:** Following grammatical rules, using proper spelling, and structuring written work gives writers credibility and allows the reader to focus on the content of the piece. We value organized, well-structured writing: students need to write with progression, so that there is a beginning, middle, and end. We value purposeful word choice and clarity. Sentence variety—including simple, compound, and complex sentences, often makes writing easier to read. Concision is important: can the writer communicate what he or she wants to say in a direct way that's easily understood?

**Contextual Appropriateness:** We value writing that is appropriate to its audiences' needs. Good writing varies depending on the purpose of the piece: the qualities of a good piece of writing depend on whether it is a letter to a local newspaper, a blog post, a university biology report etc. Writing in the first-person is appropriate in some contexts. Writing should be truthful, address important topics, and have a clear purpose. Students will benefit from being able to describe their realities, so the outside world should be brought into the classroom.

*High school and university writing contexts tend to have some different values:* High school tends more frequently to use free-writing, experimentation within assigned genres (such as poems), personal reflections, and creative writing. Creative writing forms are less common in post secondary education: individualism and voice are not valued as much as research and expertise. Strategies and processes may need to be a focus in post-secondary education, before the voice is integrated. Should teachers in high school address the unfamiliar demands their students may face if they enter post-secondary institutions, or simply make students aware of these upcoming challenges?

**Thoughtful, Interesting Content:** We value proof that the student has really thought about the questions at hand. Particularly in University, students need to provide evidence for their ideas, and if they include personal experiences, these should be linked to the purpose of the assignment. We value writing that takes a new perspective: no teacher wants to read the same paper over and over again. We value passionate writing. We value writing that takes risks; we value the opportunity to take risks. "If you are afraid to write it, then it is probably worthwhile." Honesty should be valued and appreciated. Does your writing ever become what you imagine it to be?

**Community-Building:** We value the social aspect of writing: writing creates a bond between people. We value the power of writing to help us to learn about ourselves, and to learn that that who we are matters. Writing is a connection between thought and language. Writing is an act of hope, that works against fear and disconnection. Expressing one's voice can be a mode of participating in the world, and creating social justice.

**Voice and Experience:** We value the unique voices of different writers. Could anyone else have written this piece exactly how it is? The answer should always be no! Voice is key, even though the priority is sometimes the program of studies. When someone has a voice you can tell they are a witness to the world and that they are a participant in the world community. Supplementary writing assignments may help to develop voice. Editing should happen after this personal voice has "come out": why would ever ask a student to speak in someone else's voice before they have been able to reveal their personal voice? Students try to sound "smarter," but work against this in your teaching.

Experience and vocabulary are important to voice; experience should inform writing. Students are experiential learners: they learn by doing, and reflecting on their experiences. Students learn by doing writing rather than being told about writing. At the same time, we appreciate that personal experience should be connected to research/ongoing discussion on topics.

**Writing as a Process:** Writing to discover is important. Writing can be a way of learning and thinking: it can help the author organize thoughts, make connections and write for the purpose of understanding (not just communicating with others). Writing should be an ongoing, continual process. We know that writing must be practiced, in order to be successful. This must be done on a regular basis, to capture things that excite the student. Students need time! ESL/EAL students need to take time to write expressively in another language.

*We value narrative writing:* Narrative can give writing purpose and voice, and link personal and public writing. This skill can be developed in young children: elementary and middle school students are encouraged to write stories, as well as summarize or retell stories in their own voices. We hypothesize that this increases strong writing within high school and university. Writing narratives helps students connect to the writing process. Experiencing writing early, even as narrative writing, helps students when writing at higher levels (high school and university). How do we help students to link the narrative writing they feel comfortable with in elementary school to the academic writing they are required to do later on?

*We value daily writing or blogging:* Daily journal writing or blogging can give students confidence in themselves. Blogging is a way to start writing, and it forces you to keep your audience in mind; it allows the writer to link personal experience with the world community and invite himself or herself into the world. Sharing writing in this way may automatically give your writing purpose.

**Relevance to Writers:** As educators of writing we need to find out what students value and go from there. How can we help students link their personal narrative and values to their academic writing experience? As teachers we can find connections between what we do and what we know other people, including our students, are doing. All students need to be able to realize how they learn best, and writing can be one way for them to learn this. It is important to use formats that the students are interested in; there should be different forms of expression available to students in order to integrate students with different learning needs. Writing might be a tool for students to harness their own strengths and abilities; when students are done school, they will need to be able to speak for themselves.

**Writing as a Safe Space:** Writing can be a safe way for students to discover what they think and what is true. It is important that writing instruction take place in a safe environment: an environment of acceptance and encouragement, where students can express themselves. Students should be able to write feedback to their teachers. Students learn to advocate for themselves through writing: we value giving students the space to say, "This is how I learn, this is what helps me, this is what I need to do."

*Journals may be a way to create a safe writing space:* Journal writing gives students an opportunity to express different opinions than those of their peers. Journals are a safe forum to talk, and express real topics, especially if topics are sensitive. Sentence starters can be used for journal writing. Even coming to school can be a battle for many students. Students need to trust the person they are writing for. They need to know that you want to hear their thoughts: look at the content and the message first, and do not make corrections in journals. Students should be given the option of having teachers comment on personal journal entries, or not, and it is not necessary for the teacher to read or assess every journal entry. Keep in mind: Are you reading as the audience or as the editor?

*Feedback and assessment are still important:* If an assignment is important to the instructor, students should receive grades and feedback for it. Students need to learn how to fix or improve their writing issues. We do not need to correct each instance of the same kind of error; instead, we can instruct students about the rules or skills they need to learn. Comments can have negative side effects; students may not feel proud of their work any longer: always attempt to finish with positives



## Questions:

- ⤴ How can we support each of the aspects of writing that we value?
- ⤴ What do we make of the fact that what we say we value overlaps with—*but is not the same as*—what we see ourselves appreciating in our work?
- ⤴ Once we figure out what we value, what do we do with it in our practise?
- ⤴ Are there things we value about writing that are not included here?
- ⤴ At what point in the class or assignment can you address different values?
- ⤴ What are the differences in values that emerge in post-secondary writing?
- ⤴ How do we manage the constraints of time and meeting the curriculum, while also supporting students' enjoyment of the writing process?
- ⤴ To what extent should we try to unify the expectations of different levels and contexts, and to what extent is it okay that we value different lessons and abilities at different points in education?
- ⤴ How do we develop students' styles while helping them improve their writing?
- ⤴ How much of what we value in writing comes from brainstorming? Outlining? Drafting? Revising? Editing? Etc?

### Conversation 3: Heather Graves:

#### What is your context for writing? How does it constrain how you write?

**How can we develop writing skills in other disciplines:** Students need to understand the purpose behind an assignment, and what criteria their work is being assessed on. When students have a strong grasp of the assignment's purpose, their writing is stronger. Often, when content overshadows process, writing suffers. Within secondary schools, students often analyze literary texts, and have little practice with expository forms required in the STEM fields. There is little emphasis placed on writing in other fields. Accordingly, a huge gap appears between the approaches and expectations of secondary and post-secondary writing. One way to improve students' writing in STEM disciplines is to integrate the technical language and vocabulary for that field early. It might be valuable to introduce citation, particularly APA and MLA, *before* university. English teachers are overburdened with teaching all forms of writing. Scientists need to tell the story of their research – how can we devise in-class activities between students that encourage this type of writing?

**Questions:** What would be an acceptable entrance level into a standard class like English 10? How does a teacher's experience in their own high school or university combined with previous experience teaching in an urban/rural context influence the 'context' of writing they're looking for?

## Conversation 4: Roger Graves

### 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)?

The participants read a nursing paper, and discussed the fit (and mismatch) between the criteria in the assignment, and what the writer produced.

*How can we help students write successfully across scholarly disciplines?*

#### **In each classroom:**

- ⤴ Improve student writing in the context in which they are asked to write
- ⤴ Look at genre. Don't assume as an instructor that students will understand the specific vocabulary used.
- ⤴ Include your criteria within the assignment itself. Give the student cues to produce the right thing.
- ⤴ Organizing texts appropriately needs to be taught as a skill.
- ⤴ Student success improves when they:
  - identify key verbs in an assignment
  - get started early
  - get feedback
  - revise
- ⤴ Students should be writing frequently and throughout the school system

#### **Collectively:**

- ⤴ Writing can be politicized in the school system: push for writing in, for e.g., science or math diplomas
- ⤴ Most university courses have a writing component. All teachers have to do some kind of writing to prepare their students for post secondary
- ⤴ Writing has to be done in each discipline, even if the assignments are brief
- ⤴ International reading association: Departments can get together to a central theme that is important to the community, and discuss it within each discipline (e.g. the Chicago fire can be discussed in math, science, English, social studies etc.)
- ⤴ Departments can collaborate across grade levels
- ⤴ Differentiation, instruction, responded intervention
- ⤴ This can happen despite constraints put in place by provincial exams
- ⤴ We need to get the subject areas working together to promote student writing abilities

## Conversation 5: Bob Broad and David Slomp

### What themes emerged in the conversations today?

### What gaps have become apparent through these conversations?

### What implications for can be drawn from these conversations?

### What's next?

#### ***What themes emerged within and between the conversations that occurred today?***

All disciplines cultivate critical thought, and *excellent writing is essential* to communicating this process effectively. All writing requires structure, organization and clarity of expression, voice, and syntax, and students—ideally—should be able to transfer these skills into any domain. While we value the construction of a unique and consistent voice in any piece of writing, the context of the writing should also shape the appropriate voice. Paying attention to the importance of process is also a priority: planning, drafting, making mistakes and revising are crucial parts of thoughtful and well-developed writing. Thus, separating 1) reading for content and 2) editing might be a good practice. Clear expectations for assignments produce clear and accurate results. Students need to be able to understand and deconstruct texts and assess the role of context—but as instructors we also need to ensure that writing is not merely a tool of assessment. How do we make writing more meaningful and truthful? Growth for teachers is important: we need to remind ourselves and each other that we too, are still learning and growing like our students. *How do we make today's conversation part of an ongoing dialogue?*

#### ***What gaps have become apparent through these conversations?***

There is a lack of collaboration between disciplines and levels of instruction. Biases in instructors' disciplines can create obstacles to teaching clear and consistent writing practices. Sharing resources, assessments and exercises could be a way of ensuring consistent practices. Often political measures, like diploma exams, shape practice—when a skill is not tested, it isn't taught. A large disparity is evident between what is taught at the secondary level and what is expected of students at the post-secondary level, and some university instructors may not think it's necessary to continue to teach writing skills, instructions, rubrics or assessment tools. This is exacerbated by the aim to address the needs of 70% of students who do not attend post-secondary as well as those of the 30% that do. Students also have a mental set of constraints they must work through, and it's essential that teachers teach for life beyond the curriculum. *We need to teach the curriculum, but we also need to think about life beyond it.*

### ***What implications for writing curricula and assessment practices might be drawn from these conversations?***

Context is key—we need to think about whether we are writing for ourselves, for others, for the world, for assessment, etc. All instructors would benefit from interdisciplinary discussions and collaboration, as every discipline requires clear and effective writing, with a purpose (thesis), support (evidence) and a voice. Metacognition and seeing writing within a larger context are crucial. As well, we should consider the personal relationship between student and student writing, and between the reader and the writer. This ties into assessment and how a student perceives themselves: the belief is that the assessment reflects who the student *is*, instead of how they did *on that particular assignment*, may create an obstacle to learning. We can support writing by developing the sustainability of discussions about writing, extending the conversation beyond the walls of this conference.

### ***What's next?***

We can build practical strategies: what can we do in our own classrooms? What can our colleagues do right now, to start? The conversation must also be broadened to include new voices from different backgrounds and regions, and between disciplines. In the classroom, writing needs to be taught as a broadly applicable skill, one that is not merely a standalone topic, but is instead part of all parts of education. We should work to ensure that the skills students leave secondary school with are equipping them for post-secondary education. Teachers can meet at every level to discuss and revise Alberta Education rubrics, to (inasmuch as is possible) objectively define effective writing skills. We need to support dialogue between divisions and disciplines: we could, for example, design activities that are required for all students, regardless of their major. We can begin to create the documents and other resources that will help us to continue our project of improving writing instruction. If possible, we might hold meetings in schools and communities and make it easy for interested individuals to become involved and support our aims. *We will keep working together to make writing instruction in Alberta great!*