

Spotlight — Jennifer Hutchison



Jennifer's passion for language led her to become a translator, writer, and editor in the private sector. She then used these skills to build a career at George Brown College, where she works in ESL and Communications as a sessional instructor. Jennifer is also a blog writer for TESL Ontario and just finished a three-year term on the Executive of TESL Toronto. In her spare time, she writes short stories, goes on long walks with her dog, and hangs out with family.

Your blog post, [Why We Need to Keep Our ESL Departments Open](#), struck a chord with many people. How has this situation affected you? What can people do?

How has the closure affected me? Well, I'm sad because I love the school and I love teaching EAP. There are few jobs as gratifying as this one, where you get to work with students from all over the world and can genuinely see the difference you make to their lives.

And I feel sick for my colleagues. Some permanent instructors successfully filed grievances and were able to transfer to the Communications department. But remember that they are leaving the field that they love and have built their careers on.

Plus, I'm worried about the rest of the staff. They are the ones who run things, who connect with the students every day, and who organize the many activities and events that bring magic to the place.

I also feel let down by the college, for not recognizing how invaluable the school is and not fighting for it enough, and by both the provincial and federal governments, whose policies and funding reductions have brought us to this point.

We have to remember that the school has been many decades in the making. It is steeped in the talent, experience, and compassion of not only those who work there now, but those who came before them. They are uniquely positioned to understand the myriad challenges faced by newcomers, not just with respect to language and academic skills, but with respect to housing and daily living. Consequently, to see all of this dismantled is like a slap in the face, not only to me, my colleagues and predecessors, but to the countless domestic and international students who depend on us. And what kind of message are we sending to them?

In terms of what people can do, they can shout and scream and get their voices out there. Here's a [petition](#) they can sign. They should also reach out to their federal MPs, urging them to review the decision to cut funds and cap

international student permits. And they should also appeal to their provincial MPPs to lift the government's freeze on funding tuition for domestic students. Simply put, we rely on the province's funding to deliver Ministry-mandated programming and services that are tailored to the unique and eclectic needs of our students. Students who bring with them a wealth of skills, passions, and talents to boost our job markets and economies.

You wear many hats – teacher, author, blogger, and more. I think many feel stuck in a rut right now, but you are an example of versatility. In changing and uncertain times, what else can teachers do to adjust?

Hmm. Good question. I'm lucky I'm not the sole earner of the family, that's for sure. I can't imagine being a single parent and being thrust into this new reality. Those who are particularly vulnerable are sessional college instructors and others who are paid by the hour since funding cuts mean fewer hours across the industry. For example, the TDSB has now closed five of its twelve LINC programs.

I'm lucky that I teach Communications for GBC, so I can hopefully get hours there, and since I've worked as both a writer and an editor, I may find something in those areas.

I encourage my ESL colleagues to remember that they share these skills too, that they have tremendous talent in academic and creative writing. They edit their students' work all the time, and they sure know their grammar! I recommend that they stand proud of these skills and promote them on their resumés. I've seen quite a few ads on LinkedIn for copy editors and writers.

As someone who has just finished a three-year term on the TESL Toronto Executive and as a blog writer for TESL Ontario, you are contributing to the ESL community. What have you learned during this time and what are the takeaways for people who want to get involved?

What I've learned is that ESL instructors love their craft and are eager to learn new skills. The heavy turnouts for our events and the high blog readerships make this easy to see. And I can't quantify how much I've learned from being on the board for TESL Toronto. It's just amazing to work with colleagues with this kind of talent and drive. I made real friendships there, even with people half my age. Plus, I soaked up lots of teaching tools and knowledge, not just from my fellow board members, but from the many presenters and attendees at our events.

I think you're a creative person, so if you could sum up your teaching career in the form of a metaphor or an analogy what would it be?

It wasn't until I started working in ESL that I fully appreciated how valuable it is to work with students and colleagues across languages and cultures. This experience has brought out a new side of me—a new awareness and texture that was dull or muted before. I suppose it's like bumblin' around for a long time without seeing things properly until you get the right prescription for your glasses.

When it comes to teaching writing, what would be your go-to resource?

I think it's really important for second-language students to learn how to write more concisely. They often resort to clichés and wordy expressions that disguise what they're trying so hard to say. One tool that I use a lot is [Kim Blank's Wordiness List](#). I get students to write wordy passages with elements from this list and then we work as a class to eliminate them.

What's coming up for Jennifer?

I feel the pinch of retirement, but I know for sure that I want to stay in the game. Every day, I tuck away something that students would be interested in, such as a news story, a video, or a piece of art. Whether it's teaching, researching, writing, advising, or volunteering, I'm not done yet!

***Thank you once again for your contribution,
Jennifer!***

