Learning how to think and write clearly and analytically is surely a fundamental and challenging aspect of postsecondary education—what community college or university wouldn’t teach students how to do this well, right? Wrong, as Richard Almonte, professor of English and Business Communication in George Brown’s School of Business has discovered, in his recent survey of composition teaching in Ontario.

George Brown’s Office of Applied Research and Innovation (ARI) Venture Fund, the Ontario Centres of Excellence (OCE) and Nelson Education Ltd. funded Almonte’s research. He collected data on 41 of the province’s universities and community colleges and their composition courses, if indeed they have such courses. He then surveyed them on course development, philosophy and theories and practices of composition teaching. More than 80 percent of the identified institutions responded to his survey, and 76 percent of these agreed to a follow-up electronic interview.

“Two-thirds of the province’s community colleges do have courses in composition, including George Brown,” says Almonte, “though this number is smaller than I thought it would be. For Canadian universities, it’s harder to come up with a number. Many have tended not to teach it, assuming it as a minimum prerequisite for admission, or that it’s practical remedial work for the writing lab, or that it’s imbedded somehow in an English literature course.”

George Brown’s own approach distinguishes between developing basic writing skills and developing expository and persuasive writing skills. All diploma-level students accepted to their programs must take assessment tests, post admission, in English and math. If necessary, they then take basic-level instruction for one semester before moving on to core courses in composition and math.

Today, Almonte adds, both community colleges and universities have a renewed interest in composition teaching. Though a perceived or actual lack of written literacy skills among students may have sparked this interest, a different issue motivates his own research.

Almonte conducted his Ontario survey and interviews as baseline data for the benefit of students, educators at all levels, researchers and publishers in the field. We in Canada, says Almonte, have not acknowledged the importance of composition teaching, and so we lack a full understanding of what teachers are actually doing in the field and how to conduct and improve such a fundamental aspect of learning. At a time when employers judge these very communications skills as essential in a complex, information-laden world, students, educators and researchers need to catch up and stay ahead of the curve in composition teaching and learning.

Distinct from teaching students to interpret English literature, composition teaching helps develop skills that go far beyond grammar, paragraph structure or the clever sound byte. Composition skills are applicable across disciplines and may be adapted to specific professional fields. Composition, says Almonte, is the “de facto critical-thinking course,” training the brain to research and effectively organize thoughts in modes such as comparing and contrasting, explaining causes and effects, describing processes, classifying phenomena and arguing the validity of viewpoints.

Based on Almonte’s preliminary findings, most who teach composition would say that they use process theory to do so: students workshop a piece of writing to advance it through stages of development and use peer editing along the way. This differs from the more traditional method of teaching the modes of writing as structures to which the student must adhere.

Composition teaching was prevalent in Victorian Canada but largely ceded the territory to the study of literature by the mid 20th century. By contrast, U.S. scholars, teachers and colleges have studied and practiced composition teaching extensively. There is no Canadian research journal and few Canadian-authored texts dedicated to composition teaching. U.S. research tends to focus on those Canadian universities that have some form of composition teaching, without considering community colleges, leaving a vacuum for those who teach this discipline, largely community college professors, and who want to pass knowledge on to their students.

Now that Almonte has a better grasp of the state of postsecondary composition teaching, he plans to do something about the publishing issue, too. Having already co-authored two textbooks on business communication, he aims to share his latest survey research at professional conferences for English teachers. He has also contracted with Nelson Education to write a new Canadian text on the history, theory and practice of composition teaching in Canada, to break some new ground in what he describes as “highly contested territory.”

“It’s tricky,” says Almonte, “to prove that one way of teaching composition is superior to another. I want my book to demonstrate the range of pedagogy in the field and the evolution of composition teaching—almost despite itself—as an academic discipline in this country.”