

Experts respond to report

by Julie Green

Write is right and rong is wrong . . . and never the twain shall meet.

Or at least that's the opinion of the General Faculties Council (GFC) Writing Competence Committee (WCC).

The issue of students' writing ability has been hotly debated for more than 16 hours in GFC and GFC executive committees since the WCC report was first released in January.

The WCC report found that students have serious difficulties with grammar, spelling, idiom and diction. More than 50 per cent of the 406 students tested had what the committee termed "unsatisfactory" writing exam results.

In response to this finding, GFC decided at its last meeting to administer writing competence exams to students entering a number of faculties in the fall. A remedial writing program will also be established in the fall to provide remediation for up to 50 per cent of the students tested. A President's committee on testing and remediation will be formed to oversee the implementation of the program. The whole thing is expected to cost \$150,000 to operate.

But the issue extends beyond the competence problem itself. Opinions on the validity of the WCC's test, the implications of its results and the role the university has to play in dealing with the writing competence problem, if it does at all, are varied.

The Gateway interviewed several representatives on the writing competence debate.

Professor Patricia Hayes, chairman of the Writing Competence Committee:

The findings of WCC's report reflect similar findings by other reports done in Canada. The results reflect the problem in the university as a whole. My guess is that some students with gross problems will drop out; we lose them when they fail their courses. Others have marginal grades through university. Others have obtained help from sources such as professors, informal courses on campus, their families, or they are self-taught.

We must look at the university's responsibility to the student. The original recommendation is that all incoming students be tested within the constraints of funding. If we wait until the second year (to test) then we will have lost some students because their poor writing has impeded their progress. If students pass their first year then they don't see the need to improve their writing skills.

The problems with voluntary testing are several: The ones who think they will do well will take it to prove it. The ones who have serious writing problems will take it to get help. The bulk, however, think they can write but they can't and these people are the least likely to volunteer. The only way to get this group is through mandatory testing. Mandatory testing has to take place within the university as a whole or within an entire faculty.

In the short term, the competency problem is the responsibility of the university. In the long term, the university should work with the school systems to see what can be done to assist teachers who teach Language Arts. Courses should not be designed assuming all students will go to university because they won't. However, the essay writing course could be reintroduced into the system as an option for those who plan to attend university.

I am pleased that the university is taking some action on this problem. The project has been talked about for four years and it is important to start something. Students with writing problems are not dumb. If they are bright and motivated they will do whatever is necessary to get through.

Dr. Jim Russell, member of GFC:

The original problem (of writing competence) is deeper than the failure of the schools to teach writing skills. The ability to write well comes from the ability to speak well, which in turn indicates a clear thought process. There is no evidence that this is a problem peculiar to this point in time or that it inhibits the success of individuals who would otherwise graduate successfully.

To treat the problem you must understand and prevent it. There is a headlong rush to find a treatment, people feel they must do something. The problem should be attacked at the schools' level. High school teachers are functionally illiterate. Perhaps the problem starts at the Faculty of Education which trains the teachers.

The WCC's test was not valid because it does not meet scientific standards. The statistical analysis was poor and so were the tests. The comparison of English 30 results and the WCC results weren't done properly. The low correlation of .33 shows that there is no relationship and that these factors are independent. The suspicion is that the test is useless in real terms. If one is to spend money on a remediation program, then scientific and scholarly standards must be applied to the test.

The testing is like an entrance exam and it is not the only thing that should be tested. General knowledge and mathematical ability should be tested too. In other words the university will have to administer the high school final examinations abandoned by the Department of Education. The university should then admit all the students who pass the entrance exam. If the student hasn't got what it takes to be a success at university then he would drop out.

For example, if half of one year's high school grads failed the schools would surely get the message in a hurry.

I am perturbed with GFC's attitude that we must do something. It is a waste of money as will be seen in a couple of years after the writing centre has been established and the problem is still occurring. The money that is spent on a writing center could be better spent elsewhere.

Chanchal Bhattacharya, former Students' Union vice-president academic:

On campus there is a substantial number of students who have writing handicaps, ranging from marginal to academically fatal. All the indicators show that the group is large, more than 50 per cent. I would guess that the number of freshmen who will find their writing problems academically fatal is about ten to 20 per cent.

The results of the WCC's test were valid for the purposes it was used for. It gives us a rough idea of the size of the problem. The study was as good as can be expected given the time and research limitations the committee had. Given these limitations it is valid to use the WCC's results as a model for a new remediation program.

The writing test must be purely diagnostic and not used as an entrance exam. The test should be composed of the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) and an essay question as the pilot was.

All students coming onto campus for the first time should write a mandatory writing competence test. The competence exam should not be an entrance or exit exam. It should be composed as the WCC pilot test was, of a Test of Standard Written English (TSWE) and an essay question. After

quality of education in schools. GFC should have instituted mandatory testing and enforce a remedial program that would be available to all students. Of course, a program of this type would be very expensive.

Dr. D. Massey, Trustee to the Edmonton Public School Board and Professor of Elementary Education:

Last week the trustees passed some new policies related to the writing competence problem. There will now be extra marking time for teachers, full year instead of half year English courses, and 20 rather than 15 credits in English will be required for a high school diploma.

There is evidence that the kind of thing that the university holds to be important students entering university aren't equipped with. It is a question of validity and fairness: the university demands certain skills and knowledge. Is it fair to hold high school students responsible for knowing these things? If the high school was training university entrants and test items were not properly taught then the schools could be held responsible. Most of the teachers teaching in our system were trained by the U of A and it is too simple to blame one another for the problem.



the problems are discovered, assistance should be given to those students who require it. It would be nice to have remediation available to any student who is uncertain about his ability to write English. Students with very poor writing should not be the only ones using the center.

The temporary writing center should be independent of any faculty or department. Funding for the center and the testing should be taken from the university's operating revenues, which means from tuition fees. If possible, it would be nice to get a special continuing grant from the provincial government.

The writing competence problem lies with the schools. They are not training students well enough and consequently the training given students in English is abysmal. The problem stems from poor training given teachers, their heavy workload and the high student-teacher ratio. Students shouldn't be penalized at university for the poor instruction they receive from the secondary schools.

It is not the job of the university to provide remedial English but the university should protect the quality of the degrees it issues, and therefore graduates should have a better than adequate command of the English language.

The university should protest the

