

University students lack writing skills

- by Kathy O'Brien

More and more students are entering university without having developed the basic writing skills essential for the communication of information and ideas. So claims Louise Young, director of Dalhousie's "Writing Workshop" - a program established two years ago by this institution as a response to professors' complaints regarding the low quality of writing of many students.

In an interview with Mrs. Young she stated, "One might consider that standards have fallen across the country because there is less emphasis on the formal disciplined approach to education than on the free-thinking, creative atmosphere that has prevailed in the schools during the past decade. At one time people were concerned that creativity was being stifled or at least put on the sidelines. Now people are saying, 'the ideas are beautiful. The students have great creativity, but the expression is missing'."

The major problem of most students involved in the Writing Workshop program at Dalhousie is their inability to organize ideas in an essay and make it structurally sound. Mrs. Young says, "Many times students will complain that they know what to say but that they don't know how to say it". Grammatical errors, such as incorrect pronouns, misspelled words, punctuation and problems with the general mechanics of the language, is also an area in which many students are weak.

Students are not adequately trained in writing skills before they reach university because they are not "pushed enough" at the high school and grade school levels. Teachers of classes other than English are often too willing to accept work that is badly written. As many students do not always pay attention in class or are not really interested in developing their writing skills, there should be a continual stress of these basic skills throughout the years of education. "The weaknesses can set in at any point", maintains Mr. Young. "There should be not one time we emphasize as the time to perfect one's skills in communication. It's like any other skill, a person who is to be good at that skill must practice all the time.

"As thoughts become more sophisticated and a person's ability to reason becomes more sophisticated, he has to make adjustments in his writing. Just as with his conversational level of usage he increases his vocabulary so that he can meet new ideas, discuss them and get those ideas across, he must

do the same thing with his written level of usage."

But it is not fair to lay the blame solely with the teachers. Mrs. Young, herself a former high school English teacher, feels that given the time factor in high schools and the number of students a teacher meets in the course of a day, "it is impossible to go over all of the mistakes that all of the students make."

She also views the writing problem as being exacerbated by the fact that "the exposure people now have to bad grammar through the mass media is more widespread than in past years. People read bad grammar in magazines and are constantly hearing it. There is so much information passed on conversationally that people tend to take the same level of English they hear in conversation and apply it to writing. And often conversational English is not the formal style that is acceptable in a paper."

Another factor seen as contributing to the lower writing standards is that universities have now been opened to the masses. The percentage of excellent writers has become smaller because many more people are going to university and some students who would not, perhaps, ten years ago have been admitted, are now able to get in.

"In all other countries there is not the same great push to get everyone into university as that which exists in North America", says Mrs. Young. "I feel that this has been a disservice...a bad thing to do. Some systems are geared so that not everyone follows an academic pursuit. Some students are directed into other fields of endeavor."

Mrs. Young sees one possible solution to the problem in the creation of separate classes to develop writing skills at the high school level - a course in composition of the type where the teacher would say to students, "Okay, here are fifty sentences. They could be improved. Improve them!". The problem with adequately covering such material within a regular English course, says Mrs. Young, is that there are so many important aspects to writing and literature that there is often not enough time for more emphasis on composition. An alternate solution would be to have fewer students in the English classes, thus enabling teachers to give more attention to the needs of each student.

Last year over two hundred students, either by their own initiative or acting on recommendations of their professors, sought to

upgrade their writing skills by becoming involved in the Writing Workshop program and it is expected that this year even more students will be participating. Two classes are currently underway while a third may be started at the beginning of the second term if it is found that a need exists.

The classes, which are strictly voluntary and non-credit, meet weekly on Tuesday and Thursday evenings from 7:00 until 9:00 p.m., in room B257 in the language centre of the Killam library. They aim at developing the students' language skills in grammar, the use of standard literary form, and the organization of ideas for various types of assignments that students are likely to be given.

In addition to these classes, tutorials exist Monday through Thursday so that students may seek help with individual assignments that they have had returned with many corrections. These sessions are mainly an opportunity for the student to be tutored on his mistakes on a one to one basis.

At present the Writing Workshop is still officially in an experimental stage, attempting to discover the number of students in need of such a program and evaluating benefits of the classes and tutorials to those who are involved in them. Though it has been found that a need does

exist for a program such as the Writing Workshop, says Mrs. Young, it is more difficult to evaluate what effect it has had in upgrading the written work of the students. With a good student, marks on papers may climb from a B to an A. In other cases a student may make vast improvements in his writing ability and yet not move significantly into a higher bracket. "People should not assume that all students who come into the program will become A students", she cautioned.

Mrs. Young sees one possible outcome of the Writing Workshop program in the introduction of a compulsory diagnostic English test upon entering Dalhousie to determine students' writing skills, perhaps similar to the one now given at St. Mary's University. Students failing to demonstrate an acceptable level of writing proficiency would be required to enroll in a special language skills course as a prerequisite to their registration in other classes.

However, Mrs. Young is hopeful that the literacy level of university students will begin to show an upward trend and stated, "The fact that many educators have recognized the existing problems of literacy deficiency and are seeking solutions to those problems is encouraging".

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