

# Will we discover a cure for illiteracy?

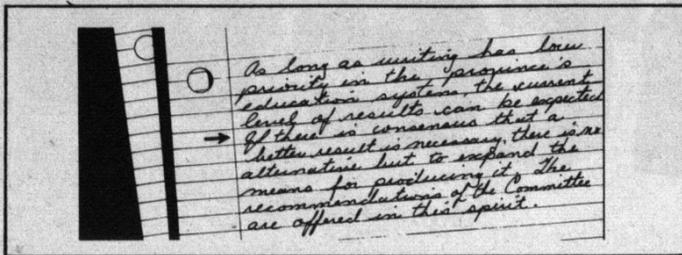
(part 2)  
**commentary by Jens Andersen**  
*Synopsis: the first installment surveyed some early reports on literacy drafted by the Faculty of Arts (the Johnson and Forrest reports) and General Faculties Council (the Martin and Marino reports).*

With the Martin and Marino reports came proposals, and eventually mechanisms, for testing the English competence of high school graduates entering the U of A. Currently this testing is done only for information purposes, with remedial courses for those who flunk. Beginning with students starting University this fall, however, the test will be a condition for re-registration. In 1987 it will be an entrance requirement.

The problem does not end with the establishment of an entrance exam. If it did, the population of the U of A would simply dwindle slowly to about half its size, since the failure rate on the U of A-administered competence test has hovered between 75 and 85 percent over the last two

years. A vast number of students can clear the language hurdle when they come to it.

The latest collection of such proposals is contained in a report by a joint committee of the Alberta Teachers' Association and the U of A. The proposals are quite straightforward: continuing competence tests, standardizing



them, and improving methods of marking them (recommendations 1-4); defining more precisely high school English curriculum and standards of achievement (recommendations 6, 7); easing English teachers' workloads (recommendation 8); increasing the high school language arts program from 15 to 20 credits in the academic stream (recommendation 9); clarifying the standards by which high school students are streamed (recommendation 10); and increasing the number of language and English courses required by all students in the Faculty of Education (recommendations 11-17).

There are a number of criticisms that can be made about these proposals, and some others that probably will. The Department of Education, for instance, may deny that there is anything wrong with the high school curriculum, as it did once before. It may also balk at the cost of hiring extra teachers and conducting thorough testing.

A better criticism would be that some of the goals are rather idealistic, and easier said than done. It is one thing to aim for a

better curriculum, it is another to find a person capable of drawing one up. Indeed, if all high school teachers had half a brain (a considerable number have less, as everyone knows) there would be no need for anything more than the sketchy curriculum that exists now.

Also, grading English will always be an inexact business, even if all the English teachers who did the marking were, by some miracle, rendered intelligent (by the time many students reach grade 12 they are beginning to spot the errors of their teachers).

A nice illustration of the incapacity of those who would lead us, ironically, can be found on the cover of the report by the joint ATA/U of A committee (see graphic), in the sentence, "If there is consensus that a better result is necessary, there is no alternative but to expand the means for producing it."

Translated from bureaucratise into plain English the statement means, "If we want better English we will have to get off our ass and actually do something." But put into plain English the banality of the idea is

too obvious. Hence the puffed-up prose that appears.

Nor is it merely puffed up; it is also imprecise. The author clearly means "there is no sensible alternative." There is, after all, the alternative of doing nothing, or striking a committee to obfuscate the question further, or dropping the atom bomb and solving a few other problems as well.

But the main objection, I think, is one that will probably be debated very little, if at all. It is the objection that those who do poorly in English are largely ineducable, and it would be a waste of time and money to try to drag them up to a level they are incapable of reaching.

For those who are violently sucking wind over this statement, I will concede that I have no conclusive evidence to back it up. However, neither is there any conclusive evidence to prove the widespread democratic belief that any one man is more or less the equal of any other. And the circumstantial evidence leans the other way.

Consider, for instance, that many students go through the meat-grinder of high school and emerge miraculously able to write clearly and forcefully. And others come out as sausages. Worse they remain sausages in spite of university education as well.

They are the ones who flunk the remedial English test a second time, after remediation. They are the ones who end up writing bureaucratise gibberish like the example cited above. They are the ones who write letters to the editor with sentences full of tortured syntax, highfalutin terminology, and pompous, redundant phrasing like, "This is the situation that we, when considered as a collective body, are in today."

Has there ever been such a thing as an uncollective "we"? Meanwhile, the mere high school graduates go on to write such things as *The American Language* in three critically acclaimed volumes. Surely there is a moral here.

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**ON CAMPUS:** Barb Veitch  
**DATE:** April 7, 1983  
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