

# Literacy conference gives gloomy view

## News Analysis by Ben Verdum

The Conference on Literacy held on campus last weekend presented a gloomy view of the prevailing standard of literacy in secondary and post-secondary educational institutions. At the same time, however, it offered some valuable suggestions for changing the situation.

Speaker after speaker expounded eloquently on the inability of modern students to read, write, spell and think, leaving innocent observers to wonder whether this downtrend in literacy could be reversed without a wholesale revamping of both the educational system and the prevalent philosophy behind teaching English.

The problem of declining literacy has been a frequent item of debate among educators, parents, pupils and the media. Delegates to the conference, however, seemed unwilling to propose any drastic changes in the teaching of English beyond proposals outlined in the Liaison report on Proficiency in English - the "Forrest" report from the Faculty of Arts.

At times it was hard to judge whether participants were merely bowing their way onto the "return to basics" bandwagon, which advocates an end to creativity and reintroduction of a more rigid way of instruction.

J.F. Forrest, chairman of the Liaison report on Proficiency in English, discussed the report in a seminar entitled "Some proposals for change."

He said the problem of literacy and proficiency is not confined to students.

Many English teachers have only one undergraduate freshman course in English before teaching the subject and as a result are ill-prepared to simulate a student in his development, evaluate his progress or diagnose his difficulties in a way which is helpful to the student, he said. Inadequate teaching produces a

generation of students who are unaware of the most basic facts of English composition, grammar and style, said Forrest.

Dr. L.N. McKill, an English professor on campus teaches English 200 to freshmen. He has incorporated a large amount of remedial writing instruction in his course.

In his opinion, students are largely deficient in spelling, grammar and composition.

McKill proposed the return of "rigor in instruction," - an end to the philosophy that expression in itself is more important than expressing something in a coherent, meaningful manner.

"Remedial work in English deals with symptoms, not causes," said McKill, emphasizing the need to focus on the

causes rather than the symptoms. While the need for remedial instruction never will be entirely eliminated, he said, it should be reduced from the present level.

The courses in writing offered by the Students' Union (and taught by Dr. McKill) are filled beyond capacity, he said, since students themselves recognize the need for proficiency in expressing themselves.

McKill stressed the need for active cooperation between the university and secondary schools. "People have a right to know about grammar," he said, adding "to deny them this right denies them the opportunity to be educated."

Dr. R.D. McMaster of the dept. of English, in a speech entitled "Why Read," noted that

the illiterate or semi-literate is living in a vacuum, unaware of the thoughts of other men and which could help him to see himself and the world around him in a broader perspective.

"Literature is communion and involvement," he said. It calls for "universal involvement."

But McMaster said the "humanist society" is disappearing in favor of a scientific one.

"The exclusively scientific mind is detached of beauty, sees life only as a series of processes which are impartially observed." This, according to McMaster, "leads to a lack of feeling and to a mechanistic, desiccated view of life."

Both McKill and Forrest urged a change in teacher training and for a re-evaluation of

teaching strategies.

"Expression without accuracy has had its day," McKill said.

"The tide is turning, students are becoming aware that they are cheated of the right to know and are increasingly becoming outraged at the quality of instruction, when it becomes apparent that their ground in English is inadequate for the demands made on it during their university education."

Forrest, too, called for a treatment of causes, rather than of symptoms. The report proposes, among other things:

-An increase in English instruction at the pre-university level, with emphasis on grammar, compositional and essay writing;

-Upgrading of teachers' qualifications by retraining those who are inadequately prepared;

-Elimination of those English teachers who have no post-secondary courses in the subject;

-Legislation by 1980 to ensure no one would be permitted to teach language arts in Alberta high schools without English as a minor within a degree program.

The report also recommends greater emphasis by the Faculty of Education providing education students with appropriate techniques to teach basic skills of composition at all levels of school programs, in view of increasingly serious problems now being encountered.

One indication that literacy is an immediate problem is the adoption by GFC Monday of the report in proficiency in English and a recommendation that entrance exams be instituted to diagnose the level of literacy among prospective students so that those needing help can be referred to appropriate areas.

The consensus among delegates seemed to be that literacy is declining in comparison to 10 years ago; that it is a snow-balling problem which produces more and more people operating on a de-facto illiterate

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## Koziak draws fire from profs

### by Gary McGowan

Weekend statements by Alberta's education minister Julian Koziak, claiming Alberta high school students are no less literate than they have been in the past years, have prompted a negative response from several participants in the U of A's conference on literacy.

English professor G. McCaughey said his reaction was "very unfavorable" and that he was "most distressed" by Koziak's comments.

"We've taken a great deal of trouble to create interest with the school teachers," McCaughey said, "then the minister comes along and drops a bomb on the whole thing."

In a speech made in Jasper on the weekend, Koziak claimed Alberta high school students are not suffering from a literacy problem because they are generally graduating with higher marks in English 30 than students have had in previous years.

McCaughey was amazed that the Minister would take such a defensive position in the first

place. "The damn government has such a large majority, it should be proposing solutions, not covering up problems."

"I'm afraid that if the Minister is prepared to make these kinds of statements, this might reflect the government's attitude towards the whole problem," McCaughey said.

"In this post literate society teachers are facing real problems in trying to develop literary skills," McCaughey claimed. "The only way to overcome the effects of television is through constant practice of literary skills."

"Unfortunately this will require greater government funding to lessen English class loads and provide teachers with more time to mark essays and supply the necessary feedback to students. Apparently this funding will not be forthcoming."

Looking to the future, Professor McCaughey sees those interested in higher standards of literacy having to take a harder line.

"If he wants to remain in that portfolio Koziak should become

better informed," he said. "The decline of literacy is a societal problem and must be corrected."

Commented Professor R.J. Merrett, one of the conference organizers: "I'm really mystified as to how he (Koziak) feels justified in making statements like these. They run counter to nearly every opinion available on the situation."

"Conference speakers from as far away as Eastern Canada and England feel the situation is serious, so it's difficult to understand such bland statements coming from Koziak."

Professor Merrett found that teachers attending the conference were "demoralized."

"We encouraged the teachers to speak out and found that they are as concerned about the problems as we are," he said. "There was no 'finger-pointing' at this conference. We were all united in feeling that literacy is an area in which immediate action is required. It's unfortunate that the Minister would make statements like these after such a positive conference on the problem."

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