

Fighting illiteracy in Canadian universities

by Andy Riga

Canadian University Press

MONTREAL - Sitting in Concordia University's guidance department, Robert explains his writing problems to a writing tutor. He has a paper due next week but hasn't started working on it. Nervous and embarrassed, he shows the tutor his last assignment, covered in a teacher's red ink. The last page reveals his mark - D minus.

Eight months after that first visit to the guidance department, Robert credits the tutor with giving him the confidence to stay in school and come to terms with his writing problem.

"Basically I didn't have the tools to write properly," says the first-year social sciences student. "At the beginning of the semester, after a couple of writing assignments, a teacher told me not to bother coming to class anymore. She told me to drop out because I was going to fail anyway.

"It was really frustrating," he recalls. "I knew what I wanted to say - I'm not a stupid person - and I knew what I wanted to write, but I couldn't but it down on paper."

Robert, who asked that his real name not be used, is one of the hundreds of students who visit Concordia's writing tutor program to get one-on-one help from student tutors, specially trained to help university students with writing problems.

Five per cent of Canadian-born university graduates are functionally illiterate. That startling statistic comes from the 1987 Southam Literacy Survey, which tested the ability to understand everyday written information. It found that about five million Canadians are functionally illiterate.

In 1990 - the United Nations' International Literacy Year - many experts concede that writing problems are widespread in Canadian universities.

Mary Mar, head of Concordia's writing tutor program, says it's hard to say how many college and university students are actually functionally illiterate.

She doubts the problem is as serious as the Southam results seem to indicate, saying most of the students getting help from tutors don't have severe writing problems.

Although she doesn't see a crisis, she does agree many university students have poor writing skills. Much of the blame

It seems strange - illiterate undergrads - and yet some estimate as many as five in 100 university students graduate without knowing how to read. Quebec news co-ordinator Andy Riga writes about some of the attempts to deal with the problem.

should be put on the way they are taught, according to Mar, who says some students who see tutors never wrote essays while in high school and college.

"Somehow they've gotten a degree from high school and college by avoiding courses that required writing. They pick courses that have multiple choice exams. They pick their courses to try to avoid their weakness.

"That's not possible in university. Sometimes they'll drop out of a course on the first day when they find out they have to write a paper, but usually if they want to study something like history or sociology they're not going to get very far without writing a paper eventually.

"It's the system itself that often permits this to happen because there isn't enough emphasis on writing."

She says writing should be part of the curriculum in every discipline - from Engineering to Fine Arts.

"Universities should make writing a central part of the introductory courses in every field. (And they should) make those courses specially designed to help people learn the style of writing in their discipline."

Patrick Dias, director of McGill University's Centre for the Study and Teaching of Writing, says there has been an increase in the number of students with writing problem. He says the increase in university enrolment over the past decade is partly to blame, but he also notes that writing is becoming less important in university courses.

"The problem is that fewer students are writing. Most won't have writing problems in university because professors don't demand enough writing from students."

But Dias says a survey done three years ago at McGill shows that there is no cause for alarm.

"Every university will have a writing problem. That's something that has always been around. Ten per cent of any large group will have serious writing problems. Another 15 per cent are going to have moderate problems that cause them considerable difficulty. And 75 per cent will range from good to excellent writers."

According to Mar, Concordia's writing tutor program - the first of its kind in Quebec - is a response to a real need that isn't being met by the university. She says a growing number of students are realizing they need help with their writing.

And one-on-one tutoring is the best way to deal with these students, Mar says, because in classroom settings, individual problems are never dealt with and students aren't able to talk about their ideas.

"A peer tutor is on the level of the student, but doesn't know more than them. It makes the writer think more about the communication process. The tutor is a real reader. Most teachers just don't have time to sit down for an hour and give the same kind of help."

She says tutors, who are students themselves, offer positive support to writers anxious about deadlines and intimidated by the idea of researching and writing essays.

"A lot of times, when students are called functionally illiterate, they only need to talk out their paper, talk out their ideas. They need to feel more relaxed and take more time to reread their writing."

Robert says his writing tutor offered him writing and organizing strategies. But most of all, the tutor provided much needed one-on-one help.

Although embarrassed by his inability to write complete sentences, he finally went to a tutor "out of desperation." After months of work, he says even his teachers have noticed a marked improvement in his writing, though he admits his writing still needs work.

"The improvement was astonishing. It was frustrating for a while but there was an obvious improvement after two or three weeks.

"I'm now able to write complete sentences - good sentences."

More and more universities are taking measures to help students like Robert. Some are forcing students to take introductory writing courses and others have introduced university-wide writing tests.

At McGill, students in some faculties must take a workshop course in effective writing. Dias says students from other faculties are clambering to get into the courses, which only have a limited number of spots open to outside students.

Because they are graded on their overall performance, students spend more time thinking about their writing than they do worrying about their marks. Students also find the courses helpful because material in them has to do with their discipline, Dias says.

The courses have been successful, Dias says, because they put the emphasis on getting students to talk out their papers with other students.

"Students are taught to realize that they have it in themselves - they can write.

"They have ideas and they can develop them. These courses have nothing to do with academic writing. Instead, students learn to enjoy writing."

At Concordia, before students are given their university degree they must pass a writing test. The essay test is marked for organization, sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary and spelling and punctuation.

About 20 per cent regularly fail this test, which students can take over and over again until they pass.

Concordia English professor Harry Hill, director of the writing test, says the exam is the next best thing to having a compulsory university-wide English 101 course, which Concordia stopped requiring when it became too expensive.

The writing test was introduced mainly because employers were complaining about the writing abilities of graduates, according to Hill.

Many Canadian business leaders are lamenting the fact that college and university graduates have poor writing skills. A 1988 business task force estimated that illiteracy costs Canadian business an average of \$4

billion annually in lost productivity, training costs, unemployment payments and industrial accidents.

The number of students who pass Concordia's test has increased over the past seven years. Eighty per cent pass now, while in 1983 only 30 per cent passed.

Hill thinks there has been "visible improvement" in the quality of student writing at Concordia since the test was introduced in 1983.

"I guess it has something to do with having an axe hanging over people's heads. We highly recommend that they take it early on, that's when it's useful. Then they see that there's a problem, and they can do something about it."

The test is designed to evaluate the writing ability of students who are at a university level. The theory, according to Hill, is that everybody should be at the same level once they get out of university.

Some critics of university writing tests say the results of such tests show that the quality of university education is deteriorating. They wonder how students who have passed all their courses and met all the requirements of their degree can fail a basic writing test.

Mar says such tests are also unfair to students in some faculties.

The university writing test makes students organize an essay, she says, but "many students may have been writing lab reports. It doesn't mean they're stupid or they can't write. The format is just not appropriate for them, and they're at a disadvantage."

According to Mar, the writing test does nothing to help people like Robert.

For his part, Robert, who still sees a tutor every week, says the main problem students with poor writing skills must overcome is their pride.

He says his biggest mistake was being too proud and embarrassed to find help earlier.

"A lot of people won't admit they have a writing problem," Robert says. "Instead of doing something about it, a lot of students end of dropping courses and taking something else that doesn't require writing."