

In an attempt to correct the inadequacy, we have usually turned to our departments of English and asked them to improve their efforts in teaching English composition. They, in turn, have responded in various ways, one of which was to study their methods in order to adopt the most effective ones. A problem immediately encountered and not yet satisfactorily solved is one of determining an acceptable method of measuring achievement, and with this, also identifying achievement itself. It is simple to count misspelled words, lack of capitals at appropriate places, incomplete sentences, and incorrect paragraphing. It is a more difficult matter to define "acceptable" thought development, clarity of conveying the whole picture, accuracy with respect to detail or its lack, etc. The correlation among grades in the latter categories is not high. One report (1) Braddock et al (page 41) mentioned "reliability of reading" of 0.57 among readers of examination compositions, on the low side, to indexes as high as 0.90 in some cases. Kitzhaber (4) quotes (page 68) a study by Diederich, French and Carlton where 300 papers were given 53 "judges" to be placed in one of nine grades. None of the papers received less than 5 different grades, and "94 per cent of the 300 papers received seven, eight or all nine of the nine possible grades." The correlation among the 53 readers was 0.31.

A classic study was made in 1906 by Franklin S. Hoyt (2). Many books refer to this study, "The Place of Grammar in the Elementary Curriculum", which, according to Lyman (5) "Reports the results of measurements which disclose the absence of relation between knowledge of English grammar and the ability either to write or to interpret language." A more recent study by Harris reported by Braddock et al (1), on students aged 12 to 14 indicated no value from grammar study on ability to write, and perhaps even a negative effect.

Kitzhaber (4) reported on teaching of writing at Dartmouth, which was a general appraisal and review but with little attempt at analysis of new data. This report seems to me to be the best single book for your review, because it identifies the many segments of teaching writing.

Jewell (3) in 1968 reported a study from State College of Iowa which found that writing performance later in college was no different between two groups, one which had taken freshman composition and one which had not.

Based on reports such as these, which predominantly indicated that writing performance was not improved through required English composition courses, our English Department at the University of Nebraska told us that they no longer expected to improve writing ability through these courses. Our faculty, therefore, after considerable debate and study,

dropped these courses as requirements. This is fully effective in 1970-71.

We are striving to develop composition courses in a department of the College of Agriculture. This department already teaches technical writing. We are still convinced that we must try to improve writing ability, but may need to assist only a portion of our incoming students.

We are also committed to efforts to improve communication in its broad sense. The faculty members have expressed this interest with real forcefulness through debates on this subject.

In conclusion, it appears that teaching grammar and spelling in a traditional manner does not accomplish our goals to improve communication skills in our students. Furthermore, to require a freshman composition course taught mainly by graduate assistants, in a department which does not believe they can improve writing ability through such a course, seems to be reaching for a rainbow. We have no real answer yet. We won't find one unless we face up to the hard facts that improvement in writing is every faculty member's responsibility.

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Communications for the Vo-Tec Agriculture Student

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"Lead us not into frustration by delivering us from writing now and forever."

This is the prayer of many of the junior college vo-tec agriculture students as they enter Lake Land College. The vo-tec student who is enrolled in the two-year program presents a different set of problems when it comes to improving communication skills than does the college transfer student. The emphasis in the college transfer program is placed upon developing and improving the writing skills of the student. In the vo-tec program, however, a different orientation and approach must be utilized. This change in orientation and approach is needed as the typical junior college vo-tec agriculture student maintained a "C" or below average in high school English courses. His ACT scores in areas which reflect his ability to communicate is seventeen or lower. The low scores of the vo-tec student reflect four or more years of frustration in high school. This frustration leads to a lack of

confidence in the student in his ability to communicate. This frustration and lack of confidence often cause the student to take cover in apathy. This three-headed monster of frustration, lack of confidence, and apathy guards the door to the classrooms of the vo-tec students who are enrolled in the communication courses. If the instructor wants to succeed in helping the vo-tec students improve in the ability to communicate, he will find that it is better to tame the monster than it is to pretend that it does not exist. The instructor of communications will soon learn that this monster thrives in a course which has initial emphasis on writing skills.

The need for a different orientation and approach than is usually used in the four year institutions or in the college transfer program is based upon the premise that the junior college must provide an avenue that will insure the success of the student. If the vo-tec student is "plugged" into the college transfer English program, his prayer for insured success will not be answered, and the three-headed monster will continue

to growl. This growl should cause the conscientious junior college instructor to question his orientation and approach. The answer that might quell the growls is "Ask not what the student can do for the program, but rather what the program can do for the student." With this guideline for orientation, the three-headed monster will soon be drugged to sleep and the students and the instructor can then get on with the business of improving communication skills. With this guideline, the negative concept that many instructors have of "weeding out" the poorer students will have to be changed to reflect the positive desire to help the student. If the instructor ignores the reality of the problems that the student faces, the student will "drop out". When that happens, the three-headed monster has succeeded in guarding the door.

If the potion is to be effective in combating the problems which face the vo-tec student, then each problem needs to be attacked in the order of occurrence. At Lake Land College, we have developed a program that may not have put the monster to sleep, but we have made the monster groggy and the growl is less fierce.

The potion for the first head, frustration, is the listening program. In the program, the student learns how to be an effective recipient of communications. Through this program the student learns characteristics of good communication as that communication is effected by others. Learning to be effective listeners prompts a desire in the student to originate communication. It also provides a basis for developing self-confidence in receiving communication. In learning to listen effectively, one need not be "grammar" conscious. What is being said is more important than how it is said. In this way, the student who is weak in grammar can find success in the communicative process. This success is a tried cure for frustration.

The potion of the second head, lack of confidence, is administered through the oral projects. The first step in the oral projects is to relate the communication of the student to the specific problems or activities that the student encounters in his vo-tec area. To relate the communication to the vo-tec area requires coordination between the instructor in the vo-tec

area and the instructor of communications. Because the student will be communicating familiar concepts from his vo-tec areas, he can feel that success is assured.

Communicating in the vo-tec area is especially suited to the use of audio-visual aids. In cooperation with the audio-visual department at Lake Land College, an audio-visual, oral presentation project was developed. In the project the student learns to develop his own audio-visual materials. He then incorporates these materials in a formal oral presentation. The use of audio-visuals helps the student gain confidence. Using audio-visual materials also helps to insure success in the student's efforts to communicate. Insuring the student's success is a sure cure for the problem of lack of confidence.

Once the first two problems, frustration and lack of confidence, have been disposed of, one finds that the most difficult job remains. However, because the student has found success in listening and speaking, he has gained confidence in his ability to communicate. With this confidence he attacks the third problem. The potion for the problem, apathy, is found through the development of meaningful written communication. Again, the emphasis in this project area is on what is communicated, not how it is communicated. Once confidence in the ability to write is developed, then weaknesses in the communicative process can be attacked constructively. The writing projects flow from the vo-tec area. Again, there is need for co-ordination. Through the co-ordinated efforts from both the vo-tec and communication departments, the student's communication will be meaningful and "real". Meaningful and "real" communication will be the potion that will destroy the apathy that the vo-tec student has inherited from his past failures.

Once the student has reached this stage in the communicative process, the three-headed monster of frustration, lack of confidence, and apathy will be drugged. Now the real job of helping the student improve his communication skills can and hopefully will succeed. Let us seek to accomplish the task before the monster awakens.

Amen!

Improving Communication Skills of Agriculture Students at the University of Illinois

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Mr. Steele was a member of the panel on "Improving the Communication Skills of Agriculture Students," presented at the NACTA Convention on the University of Illinois' Urbana campus in June, 1970. This article is an expansion of the talk he presented on that panel.

INTRODUCTION

A Cause for Concern

For twenty-four years, until April 1968, a requirement for graduation from the University of Illinois was a B in Rhetoric 102 (or its equivalent) or a passing grade on the English Qualifying Examination (EQE). In spite of this rule, many students at the University were not proficient in the art of communication, particularly written communication. As each year passed, more and more of those who were required to take the EQE failed it, including College of Agriculture students. From 1960 through 1966, 60% of all our students taking the qualifying exam failed to pass, compared with 54% for the University as a whole.

A Time for a New Approach

In March 1965, Provost Lyle H. Lanier echoed a question that colleges, universities, and faculty have pondered for years: "How can the Department of English through a two-semester

course accomplish something which the educational system and the entire society have failed to accomplish prior to the freshman year in college — and for which the educational system at the University, apart from the Department of English, assumes little responsibility?" The Provost also suggested that perhaps the time had come to try to develop new approaches to the problem.

A Possible Solution

Perhaps cued by the suggestion, Professor Hadley Read, Head of the Office of Agricultural Communication and member of the Senate Committee on Student English in 1965, conceived the idea of hiring a specialist in the use of the English Language to work in the College of Agriculture. He presented his idea to the Senate Committee on Student English and to the administration of the College of Agriculture. "While the Committee did not wish to make a recommendation on Read's plan, ON MOTION the Committee went on record as being interested and as believing that the plan was worth trying."¹

¹Minutes of the Senate Committee on Student English, April 5, 1965.