

Aid Offered In English To Students

(EDITOR'S NOTE: What happens when students arrive at college but are unable to read fast enough or write well enough to do the required work? This article, last of a two-part series, examines the remedial programs at Grossmont College.)

By DEL HOOD
The El Cajon Californian

Car manufacturers can recall family automobiles, but so far no system has been devised for schools to recall students who are inadequately prepared.

"We have to take students the way we get them," says Fred Stollenwerk, and English instructor at Grossmont College who works with his colleagues on remedial instruction programs.

Frequently, the preparation of students in the fundamentals of English leaves much to be desired.

What are the reactions of students who enroll in college classes and then find they do not have the reading or writing skills to complete the work?

Usually, says Stollenwerk, they fall into two categories — those who demand that the standards be lowered to their level and those who feel cheated because they didn't learn, or were not taught, the skills they needed.

"Either they have to pooh-pooh the whole thing or do something about overcoming the deficiencies," Stollenwerk says.

Many students readily admit their deficiencies and ask for help.

"I need much improvement in composition," one student wrote on a class evaluation form. "I am wk. in writing a sentence & knowing that it is correct," another advised his instructor. "I enrolled in this class to better understand the fundamentals," a student wrote.

To the question, "In what aspect do you feel that you are particularly weak?" a student responded: "In writing, particularly. In sentence fragments."

Poor spelling is a frequent complaint.

"If only I could spell," one student wrote. "Was it the Bible that said spelling is the root of all evil or was the money. Oh, well, it doesn't make much difference. I haven't got much of either."

Several remedial courses are offered at Grossmont College which focus on improving a student's grasp of the fundamentals of writing. There is a special course for foreign students and for science-oriented students who eventually will be required to write technical reports.

One of the newest additions to the curriculum is a spelling course which is listed in the catalog as exactly that. No subterfuge. No euphemisms that would make it sound more sophisticated than it is.

Peter Bradley, who describes his approach as unorthodox, teaches the class using a kind of psychic exercise which attempts to remove the hidden fear of words.

"A great many students have mental blocks when it comes to spelling," says Bradley.

He calls his class an experience for "learning through laughter." His aim is to put the students at ease so they will be less anxious about possible failure.

Poor spellers, he contends, often have an unflattering image of themselves. "They consider themselves flunkies and therefore everything they touch is a failure," Bradley argues.

Tom Spiegel, in his fifth semester at the college and hoping to become a journalist, had a problem with spelling that threatened to close off his career before he even got started. He enrolled in Bradley's class and became acquainted with 70 to 100 new words each week.

"Before when I spelled I wouldn't pronounce the word," he said. "I'd just write it down. I'm catching sounds I never knew about before. Every exam we have I've improved by at least 10 points."

What is the biggest factor in lack of success with college-level work?

"If you have to pick the No. 1 cause, it's poor reading," says Stollenwerk. "The poor reader goes to a history class and it takes him twice as long to reading something. He doesn't do as well as he might."

Getting students into a reading improvement program is sometimes difficult because they do not realize their plodding pace is below the normal range.

But those who can be convinced to enroll often report astonishing improvement.

"Those who took the 105 program (reading) improved by four times over those who didn't," says Homer Lusk, who directed the English department last year.

John Snapper teaches the reading course, stressing vocabulary building, speedier reading and better comprehension.

Failure to recognize even simple words, he says, can destroy the meaning of an entire paragraph and cause a slow reader to stumble along not really knowing what he has read.

"If they don't see that it is 'propose' rather than 'purpose,' the whole sentence is lost to them."

Students who take the course and read 140 words a minute usually can read an average 220 words a minute by the time they finish, he says. This is still below the minimum desirable college speed of 290, but with the improvement they can manage.

"It's really a tremendous reward to see a good percentage of them have their confidence tremendously expanded and their ability to deal with sentences and paragraphs improved and to extract meaning from it," Snapper said.

There are also auto-tutorial programs through which students can get extra help working alone with a cassette player and the sound of an instructor's voice. Tutoring services are available for those who need it.

English teachers at the college are given a lighter teaching load so they can devote time to working with students on writing skills. They are in the classroom 12 hours a week rather than the normal 15.

"By and large the community college cares for the person-to-person contact with particular emphasis on the individual's problem" says Lusk.

Some college teachers see a swing of the pendulum back to fundamentals after the long flirtation with what is called the "wholistic approach" — trying to evaluate a student's work on the basis of his ideas while paying little attention to

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