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Article abstract

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Article

“Nobody who can’t write can get a degree here”: The story of a Canadian university writing test

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Introduction: Concordia’s University Writing Test (UWT)

One Friday in early November of 1983, 64 first-semester undergraduates at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec, sat down to take a brand-new mandatory English writing test. Described as a “basic keystone in the system for providing for competence in written expression” (“Can students”, Sept. 28 1982) the University Writing Test (UWT) was meant to be a firm answer to a media-reported crisis that had been sweeping across North America since the mid-70s, and whose most frequent subjects of criticism were post-secondary students. One of the UWT’s staunchest advocates, and the coordinator of the University’s English composition courses, was Professor Harry Hill. During a University Senate interview about the UWT several years later, Hill described the situation thusly:

What we are doing at Concordia University at Montreal is what many American universities are now doing, which is admitting and failing passing students, and the great fault of the majority of the failing students is that they cannot write.¹

We do not know whether any of those first test-takers knew or cared that they were the subjects of an almost decade-long institutional journey. It is easy to imagine that for them the UWT was one more in a system of obscure bureaucratic hurdles necessary for graduation. To the UWT’s administrators, however, that first November session was the culmination of a complex passage. Fueled by years of popular and institutional reporting, the UWT was not just the result of perceptions that a problem of crisis-level proportions existed in relation to the quality of undergraduate writing— it was also a response to administrative anxiety about institutional credibility. Indeed, Hill claimed that the UWT “has given this university’s degrees some modicum of respectability. Nobody who can’t write can get a degree here” (“UWT mandatory”, Oct. 21, 1986).

Hyperbole aside, for some of its key stakeholders the UWT was about more than measuring student writing competence. To understand what those stakes may have entailed—how one Canadian university’s institutional ethos became inextricably entwined, in both public and internal statements by its representatives, with undergraduate writing—we decided to undertake an archive-based analysis of the events leading up to the UWT’s inception. Two teacher-scholars of Writing Studies who have both served variously as faculty and coordinators of Concordia’s Composition and Professional Writing program in the 2000s, we are/were connected in immediate ways to the UWT. Our goals in telling its story are twofold. First, we aim to show how the long and complicated project of improving student writing at Concordia University in the mid-1970s and early-1980s was inseparable from an equal desire to improve the institution’s reputation at a moment when institutional resources were scarce, and competition for them intense. Next, we want to explore the degree to which local institutional conditions influenced internal decision making in relation to contemporary judgments of the writing “crisis” and Concordia student competence. Finally, we are interested in mapping the ways that efforts to address the perceived crisis proceeded from plan to action.

We see our study as falling into the category of writing program historiography known as microhistory: a narrative reconstruction that explores in thorough detail a particular time period in a specific writing program’s history while striving to remain sensitive to the socially constructed attitudes of the primary actors. One of the signal values of microhistory for writing program scholars, Annie Mendenhall (2016, p. 40) writes, is that the reduced scale of analysis—from several decades or even longer to much narrower time frames—allows for close analyses of what actually shaped the actions of key stakeholders. Attending to the archival record while carefully monitoring our evaluations for preconceived assumptions creates opportunities for the examination of some of the meta-historical conclusions connected to master narratives in our field, the “myths” about which Dana Landry (2016) offers a thorough examination in her “people’s history” of Canadian Writing Studies. By critically analyzing the patencies and complications that existed between local and wider discourses underpinning writing pedagogy, such microhistories as the one we undertake here help reveal the “material and ontological” realizations of the ways that Landry’s broad myths continue to shape Writing Studies in Canada: that the teaching of writing is neither difficult nor scholarly; that all most struggling writers really need is a one-time remedial corrective course focused largely on grammar; and that writing is not worthy of serious academic attention (Landry, 2016, p. 63). Microhistories respond to Bryant’s (2017, p. 17) call for “concrete research” that will help us to understand

the etiologies of these tenacious meta-narratives, and in particular those that serve as warrants for the “complaints tradition” discussed by Heng Hartse (2018) during his keynote speech at the CASDW’s annual conference. Further, in her microhistory of New York state literacy testing, Tricia Serviss (2012, p. 210) sums up the value of microhistory for our thinking about the assessment of writing when she notes that studies about program testing can help inform current assessment methods, often disrupting assumptions that assessment methods have taken a linear-progressive path toward improvement:

Analysis of the tests offers a genealogical view of this assessment trope that continues as scholars define and develop local writing assessment methods and practices. We need more histories of local writing assessment so that we can have a richer sense of the practices and approaches used by practitioners across time, disrupting our assumptions about the deep roots of standardization alone in our writing assessment past. It is easy to assume that literacy and writing testing have been uniformly evolving in predictable ways, moving from archaic to more advanced strategies. The case study of the New York state literacy tests complicates this trajectory in surprising and helpful ways, emphasizing how efforts to balance demands for standardized writing assessment alongside localism are persistent and important writing assessment tropes well before the 21st century.

This historiography, therefore, explores several questions: How and by whom was Concordia influenced in determining that a writing crisis existed? What were the administrative processes by which the crisis was addressed? What does the administrative record reveal about the intersection of unique local conditions with broader national trends? To address these questions, this narrative reconstruction relies on sources housed in the Concordia University Senate Archives, and in particular on documents found in the collected papers of Dr. James Whitelaw, a key figure in the UWT’s narrative. Ultimately, we argue that in the story of the origins of the UWT a cautionary narrative unfolds, in which concerns still common in Canadian writing programs exerted distinct but cumulative pressures sufficient for the evolution of an idea that became an implicit assumption among the UWT’s proponents: that writing assessment tests themselves have a corrective effect on weak writers.

A word about our methods: It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this historiography, which mirror those generally connected to archival reconstructions. While every effort has been made to accurately reframe the narrative according to its most correct timeline, the process, like all archival work, has frequently been difficult. In places, the record alludes to documents which could

not be found despite the excellence of the professional archivists at Concordia Records Management and Archives; at other times, overlapping documents make it difficult to make firm decisions about the order of events. However, every effort has been made to provide a richly detailed and accurate picture of the UWT's origins. Where necessary, gaps in the record are explicitly signalled in the hope that future research may fill them in.

The following section, "Kids these days", provides historical context on the media-reported crisis connected to writing skills. After this background, "A geneology of committees" sets out the history of Concordia committees tasked with addressing the writing crisis from the mid-70s to the early 80s. Next, "Areas of responsibility" discusses the Senate discussions about the possible origins of writing incompetence as well as some of the political factors that may have influenced Concordia's official response. Finally, in our conclusion we describe the results of the first UWT test and how these may have foreshadowed its future.

Kids these days: "The new illiterates" of the 1970s

Writing a decade later about being a new writing teacher in the mid-1970s, the American Composition historian Stephen North recalled that "[N]othing else in English compared with the excitement, the absolute fervor, of a Compositionist fired by what was declared to be a national literacy crisis" (1987, p. ii). In his now-classic monograph on Canadian post-secondary writing instruction, Roger Graves notes that several universities began writing proficiency tests in the 1970s (1994, p. 5). In part, these tests were the result of the fervor-furor caused by a widespread belief in the poor quality of young people's writing at both the high school and the post-secondary level. Coupled with the rise of economic "value-added" models in higher education, the literacy crisis of the 1970s was the impetus behind attempts both to offer objective measures of the problem and to build support for the institutions undertaking them (Graves, 1994, p. 8).

There was considerable speculation, inside and outside academia, about the origins of the crisis. One of the most famous essays on the topic was published in the April 1976 issue of *Reader's Digest*. "Why Johnny can't write", by Merrill Sheils, paints a picture of a typical native-English speaking American college student whose inability to meet even minimum standards in written communication is a consequence of several factors: a television-induced decline in reading; changes to pedagogical emphases, especially at the college level, which the article attributes to the rising popularity of structural linguistics and that discipline's perceived correspondent focus on spoken language over written Standard English; the general laxness and irregularity of the new generation

of college professors; and the myriad social upheavals of the preceding sixties. “Johnny” implies that in these failings can be read not just the threat of economic disintegration caused by an incompetent newly matriculated workforce, but also the unravelling of the nation’s moral and intellectual fabric. As a rallying cry, Sheils’s article was powerful; its title became a durable catchphrase that continues to appear in North American news, both academic and extra-academic (Bartlett, 2003; Perloff, 1997; “Why Johnny”, 2017). Nor was the discourse of crisis confined to American contexts. In Canada, the narrative was just as widespread.

A year before Sheils’ essay appeared in the US, a 1974 article in *The Toronto Star* decried the average Canadian undergraduate, quoting professors from several central Ontario universities complaining that “the new illiterates . . . can’t write a sentence, don’t know where to put a comma, can’t spell, and can’t think logically” (“The new illiterates”, 1974, Jan. 17). After Sheils’ essay, a nationally recognized Canadian news magazine, *Macleans*, ran a series of related articles, including “Why Johnny can’t read in Britain either” (Dec. 13, 1976); “What Johnny can’t read” (June 11, 1979), and “Wailing and dealing” (March 19, 1979). A 1982 article in the *Montreal Gazette* quoted the findings of a 1978 Humber College study claiming that of nearly 4,000 first-year students, only 100 could write at an acceptable level. “Most of them can speak English fluently,” the *Gazette* quotes unnamed Humber sources as saying, “but their writing skill and use of grammar and spelling are at about the Grade Four level” (“Why”, Oct. 2, 1982). In a 1980 Concordia report, undergraduates are described as suffering from a “general syndrome of academic incompetence resulting from a variety of variables such as low motivation and poor intellectual preparation.”²

Alongside the direct effect of public perception and academic reports on the fermenting literacy crisis, other, less-obvious factors were at play in Canadian contexts. These factors had to do with the character of Canadian higher-education in general. First, Canadian governments have generally been happy to leave issues of academic quality in the hands of the universities themselves; as a result, issues of quality control and academic credibility have been left largely up to individual institutions; and as Weinrib and Jones note, “high levels of institutional autonomy meant that [historically] there were only modest levels of system coordination” (2014, “Evolution of higher ed”, n.p.). In terms of the expanding enrollments in the post-WWII period, this meant that individual institutions were responsible for monitoring and addressing issues related to their own academic quality (Weinrib & Jones, 2014, “Evolution of higher ed”, n.p.). In the case of the 1970s “Johnny” literacy crisis, institutional independence, coupled with competition for provincial government funding and the expanding and changing face of the typical undergraduate cohort, may have contributed to the

perception that universities could and should be able to find short-term fixes for a transient writing crisis.

Additionally, in the mid-70s--as now—budget cuts at the post-secondary level were driving fears about job security. Consequently, many faculty associations began efforts to gain union status, a development that also changed the influence and exercise of power in university senates. Spurred by the 1966 Duff-Berdahl Report, Canadian university senates opened to allow faculty and students to assume a greater role and voice. The union character of the faculty, which was taking over responsibility for promotion and tenure matters, meant that senates also became more active in developing and implementing university academic policy. From there, they became increasingly central decision-makers in academic matters (Pennock, Jones, et al., 2015, “Introduction”, n.p.). As such, the issues that were taken up and the decisions made at Concordia can be seen to reflect concerns for the senate’s new business of maintaining and promoting academic integrity.

Toward an “appreciation of administrative implications”: A genealogy of committees

As suggested above, in the latter half of the 1970s the complaints tradition was assuming iterations so widespread and multidimensional that its capacity for affecting institutional discourse was at a high-water mark. Indeed, in 1982, James Whitelaw, who since the mid-70s had been Concordia’s Associate Vice-Rector in charge of academic planning, called the poor quality of writing among North American undergraduates a “continent-wide concern” (“Test have twofold”, 1982). Mirroring the complex set of factors shaping popular belief in undergraduate illiteracy, an increasingly abstruse Concordia University Senate record was growing around the various committees, reports, and hearings about the nature of, and potential solutions for, the “crisis” that existed locally among Concordia undergraduates. The following timeline of committees demonstrates how the discourse about writing was subject as much to interruptions and incompletions as it was to persistence and planning.

The Arts Faculty Council (AFC) Literacy Committee

The first committee predecessor whose activities bear direct archival connections with the UWT was the mid-70s Arts Faculty Council (AFC) Literacy Committee. Tasked with reviewing the state of

undergraduate writing at Concordia near the apex of the North American “Johnny can’t write” outcry, the six-member Committee submitted a report to Concordia’s Senate on Oct. 18, 1974.³ In this excerpt from its opening statement, the AFC report offers a telling window into both how student writing was perceived at Concordia and how the extent of the problem was measured:

I. The Problem

There are a number of native English-speaking students whose ability in writing prose is so poor that it is hardly possible to understand what they are trying to say [. . .]

Although firm statistics are not available, it seems that about 10% of our students do have extreme problems. The 10% estimate was made after discussing the issue with a number of teachers in different departments. A rough estimate seemed to be that about 3 students in any 30-35 seat class had gross deficiencies in their ability to communicate in writing. (AFC Report, p. 1)

Statistical claims based on “rough estimate” measures notwithstanding, the first AFC Committee’s major recommendation involved the creation of a course emphasizing “grammar, sentence structure, and other fundamentals of good usage” (p.1). This course, eventually proposed as English 209, was to be based on an earlier course previously offered by the University, English 211. Significantly, English 209’s goal was not “total cure” (p.1). In a statement reminiscent of Graves’s (1994, p.22) observation about the pervasive influence of the British belletristic model on Canadian composition, the AFC report notes somewhat wryly, “The aim is not to produce Churchills, but we do hope that students will learn that sentences have a verb (plus a little more)” (p.1).

Most significant to the narrative of the UWT’s origins is a suggestion made in the Senate discussion about the AFC report. Discussing how students would be encouraged to take the remedial course, the minutes of that session make what is likely the first move toward the mandatory test model later instantiated by the UWT: “Professor Charlton suggested that some thought should be given to making a pass in English a requirement for a degree.” (AFC Minutes, p. 12).

Its report and the Senate discussion are the only extant record of the AFC Literacy Committee found during the course of this research; the Literacy Committee is assumed to have been short-lived.⁴ However, the AFC’s work continued to be noted by later administrative bodies. In Appendix B of the Final Report of the Committee on Written Expression, April 1980, it is noted that “Mention of the [AFC] committee’s report was made by newspapers across Canada (including for some reason the *Financial Times of Canada*). Apparently the time was ripe. English 209, incidentally, has never been offered” (np).⁵

The University Curriculum Coordinating Committee (UCCC) on Competence in Written Expression

After the AFC, the next committee to enter the record is 1977's University Curriculum and Coordinating Committee (UCCC).⁶ Comprised of members from English, TESL, and various "other persons with known interest and expertise"⁷—interested "specifically in criteria and activities dealing with competence in written expression" (CWE, 1977, Appendix A cover note)—the UCCC produced a capstone report called *Competence in Written Expression* (CWE). Notably, and unlike the limited research done by the AFC committee in 1974, the CWE was the result of a far-reaching and extensive set of information-gathering activities. Not only did the UCCC conduct interviews internally, with "persons most likely to be informed on the subject" like the "Chairmen (sic) of two English departments, the persons in those departments with special responsibilities in the area of teaching English composition, and the Director of the Centre for the Teaching of English as a Second Language," it also contacted other Canadian universities and "appropriate persons" involved with high school level writing (CWE, 1977, p.2). Also cited is the 1976 report produced by the Association of Canadian University Teachers of English (CWE, 1977, p.2), a report whose implications for the continuation of the belletristic model in Canadian composition pedagogies are taken up by Graves (CWE, 1977, p.2).

The CWE was sent to the chairperson of the Senate, Dr. J.W. O'Brien, on March 29, 1977, and tabled before Senate on April 22, 1977. In the letter introducing the UCCC's report to Dr. O'Brien, the UCCC's chairperson, Dr. James H. Whitelaw, writes:

The Committee is aware that, given the preoccupation of Senate and Arts and Science Faculty Councils with the re-structuring of Arts and Science, this may not be the most appropriate time for Senate to debate what is a very important and complex issue. At the same time, the Committee is most anxious that the University community be aware of the complexities of the problem and of the implications of the various types of action which might be taken. There is also the fact that we are dealing here with an issue which has been receiving a lot of publicity and there seems to be an expectation in the minds of many sectors of the public that educational institutions, including universities, should be doing something about it.

Conscious, perhaps, of its status as a writing taskforce working within an Anglophone university in Quebec, the CWE report sets out in its foreword the exact demographic to which its energies are aimed. While other Concordia policies already existed for students "whose first language was not

English,” the UCCC defines its goal as the production of “a more specific policy for students whose first language is English, but whose written expression is not of an acceptable level” (CWE, 1977, p.2). Alluding to previous efforts at addressing the issue, the foreword also notes that the Committee was delayed by the “[p]ressures of other business, much of it arising from the merger situation, or from the demands of outside agencies” (CWE, 1977, p.2); one may assume that the merger referred to is the one describing the transition of Sir George Williams to Concordia University in the wake of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, a point addressed in more detail later in this paper.

Repeating Whitelaw’s comment to O’Brien about public perception that the problem was the responsibility of universities, the CWE continues, in subsection 1 of “The nature of the problem,” by noting that “[t]he inability of a large proportion of university students whose first language is English to express themselves clearly and correctly in that language is causing widespread concern” (1977, p.2). The report then discusses the factors which may be responsible for the perceived crisis. Taking aim across the bows of both the “disciples of McLuhan [who] claim that this concern is irrelevant and that any attempt to return to approaches taken in the past is doomed to failure” and Canadian elementary and secondary schools, at which acquisition of adequate writing skills “might reasonably be expected to take place” the UCCC notes again that “most institutions are worrying about the situation, and some are endeavouring to do something about it” (CWE, 1977, p.2).

Next, the UCCC sets out several approaches to “doing something.” In the first case, it notes (somewhat ironically) that an institution could opt to do nothing, simply accepting the failures passed on from secondary schools and “[shrugging] off the fact that many of its graduates are not fully literate, and, in some cases, downright inarticulate.” A second option would be to conduct admissions testing, the results of which could result in the refusal of some students to the University. However, “[a]t a time when enrollments are falling, and the obtaining of adequate government funding depends in a large measure on keeping numbers up, the dilemma of post-secondary institutions is accentuated. . . [H]ow far can post-secondary institutions allow themselves to appear to condone sub-standard performance?” (CWE, 1977, p.3).

The worry expressed in the lines above is interesting on two fronts. First, the “dilemma” description provides rare evidence, in a Canadian university’s official internal discourse, of an approach in which writing competence becomes a fulcrum balancing an institution’s reputation for scholarly rigor and its obligations to tuition-paying students who may not be sufficiently prepared to meet those standards. In her 2010 archival study of administrative attitudes toward writing at the University of California, Jane Stanley points out that one of the defining characteristics of the post-

secondary attitude and practices toward undergraduates who need more support is ambivalence (p.6). She goes on to demonstrate how universities both depend on for enrollments, and resent for the allocation of resources, the demands of students who need literacy support; writing program records often therefore reveal a blend of resentment and dependence on the part of administrators who believe that dedicating resources to writing support is a temporary measure, because illiteracy is itself a transient issue (Stanley, 2010, p.8). Indeed, in 1980 the Concordia record contains explicit evidence of the transience assumption. The second of a series of official Senate positions in Part B of the "Recommendation for the improvement of competence in written expression" approves: "2. The University's playing a remedial role until such time as entering students possess a higher level of competence" (UCCC, 1980, 188-D1, p.3).

As thorny dilemmas can when they are couched in crisis rhetoric, perhaps this one precluded careful collection and analysis of factual data. Most remarkably, from the AFC's estimate, only three years earlier, that 10% of the Concordia student body was in need of remediation, the UCCC's "estimates of inadequate preparedness in writing skills are in the 45-55% range [and therefore] universities cannot afford to appear to be doing nothing, if only because society expects them to act" (CWE, 1977, p. 3).

Remarkable as it is that the number of Concordia undergraduate students with substandard writing skills could increase 35 to 45% in the space of three years, the CWE, like its predecessor the AFC report, offers very little in the way of a detailed definition of what, exactly, constitutes the "poor writing" disease afflicting half its student body—though it is clearly aware of the risks the perception of illness poses to its public image. Indeed, in phrasing suggestive of a spreading epidemic, the report offers the revealing phrase "the candidate—or the 'patient' . . ." when discussing testing as a possible combined diagnostic and curative (CWE, 1977, p.5). Societal expectations seem the main engine driving the UCCC's plan for identification and correction. If "remedial activities" are to be made obligatory, the CWE notes later, "a number of important considerations must be tackled, some of which, unfortunately, stem from political issues (in the broadest sense of the term) rather than from the basic objective of turning out articulate and literate graduates" (1977, p.6). The Committee's political concerns include Concordia's "competitive stance with regard to sister institutions" (p.6), the possibility that making a writing test a requisite for graduation might create problems for the administration when otherwise graduate-ready students cannot pass the test, and, of course, the associated cost. Its preferred method is testing at "the point of entry" and subsequent referral (1977, p.4). Students should not be allowed to take the test voluntarily, since "it is hardly likely to reach

more than a small fraction of those in need of it" (1977, p.4). Nor should a writing test be eliminatory, since "[I]t would be hazardous . . . for Concordia to embark upon eliminatory testing, unless the other English-language universities in Quebec—and perhaps some others within easy reach—adopted a similar policy" (1977, p. 4); the significance of this point in relation to Concordia's Anglophone status and its history among Quebec post-secondary institutions is discussed in more detail later.

Developing the UWT: English over French; Costs; Blame

The UCCC's report was to become the cornerstone in all successive administrative discourse about student writing, and it was responsible for laying the seedbed for all subsequent conversations about testing. From April 1977 to February 1982, recommendations made in the UCCC report "Competence in Written Instruction" are taken up seven times in University Senate meetings with the CWE committee. Most relevant for this discussion was the report's fourth point, which recommended "the development of a thoroughly dependable diagnostic test by the Department of English and the Centre of the Teaching of English as a Second Language, working in collaboration with any other persons in the University having expert knowledge or appreciation of administrative implications" (UCCC, 188-D1, Appendix B, p. 3). The proposed test would be "administered to all new admissions to undergraduate programmes who declare their first language or main language of previous instruction to be English" (UCCC, 188-D1, Appendix B, p. 3).⁸

Not surprisingly, the "priority in determining costs" is a recurring theme throughout the archival record. Working through the logistics of a testing system, writes Whitelaw, requires consideration of expenses and stresses:

1. The cost of preparation, invigilation and marking of the tests.
2. The cost of the writing clinics--instruction and materials.
3. The provision of space for testing and for the clinics.
4. The administrative costs inherent in the coordination and supervision of the testing and clinic programme, possibly involving the creation of a specific administration unit.
5. The additional demands on the Office of the Registrar and the Student Information Systems. (1980, 188-D1, p.8)

It is interesting to note, as one reviewer to this article did, that the points above recall the "language of patients and illness" in words like "testing" and "clinics." As for money, it had long been the insurmountable obstacle for writing competence committees at Concordia. As Whitelaw did in 1980, the 1978 UCCC report worried that "even the relatively low cost of administering such a test is, under

present circumstances of austerity, an expenditure that the University can ill afford" (1978, 116-D1, Appendix A, p. 1). At this point, a note of parenthetical exasperation begins to creep into the record. Summarizing the long wake the writing problem was leaving in Senate council meetings, the CWE says that the records "give the impression that a consensus is emerging. The consensus appears at least to acknowledge (again) that there is a problem and more importantly, that something can and should be done about it." ⁹

Submitted to Senate in April of 1980, the Final Report by the Committee on Written Expression sets out a statement about what the University's project should be:

Essentially what is called for is a modest requirement that students be able to write clearly and coherently. No demands are made for sequences of brilliantly balanced sentences which when fitted together will move nations to heroic efforts or professors to assign A+ grades. It is also possible to reach agreement on what constitutes writing "clearly and coherently." ¹⁰

The report goes on to offer a recommendation based loosely on a "tutorial-style writing clinic" run by the University of Waterloo in response to a similar test of proficiency required of its undergraduate students. Its main thrust, however, was for the establishment of a writing proficiency test that would act as a graduation requirement.¹¹

Despite the CWE's optimism that improving the standard of writing was both a realistic and achievable goal, little happened for two more years. In July of 1982, Dr. John O'Brien, the acting rector, offered several reasons for continuing delays to new members of the University Senate. First, that the level of undergraduate writing competence had been and was still before Senate "was, in itself, an indication that a solution was not easy."¹² Even "modest action" was likely to be difficult, given the scarcity of ready solutions that were both practical and affordable.¹³ The University was unlikely to be able to dedicate substantial resources to the problem, but neither could it "say that we can't afford it, and do nothing." For reasons that the record does not provide, Dr. O'Brien says that the writing issue at that point was "in as clear a form as it was ever likely to get before Senate" and that in that year, 1982, the time had finally come when "we must wrestle with what we are to do in this area."¹⁴

But who should be responsible for fixing the problem? In the mid-seventies, there was a persistent widespread view that the responsibility for writing instruction lay not with the university but with the high school (Graves 8). In Quebec, the relatively recent inception of the CÉGEP model made, perhaps, an even more inviting target for those people seeking to transfer the blame.¹⁵ Complicating the sixties' transition from a classical seventeenth-century higher-education model to the CÉGEP model had, as Graves points out, coincided with a dramatic increase in Quebec post-secondary

enrollments and the Quiet Revolution, factors which were bound to change the landscape of higher education (15). The CÉGEP system was supposed to prepare its students for university by providing an admirably well-rounded liberal humanist education. Beside university-preparatory level courses, the curriculum included technical and general education combined with community-based education (Graves 15); however, its alleged failures were woven into the narrative about writing at Concordia.

In 1982, the acting Vice-Rector of the University, Dr. John O'Brien, explained to new Senate members that past council sessions had felt that change at the university level alone would not be sufficient:

The feeling was expressed that what we were talking about was the University attempting to do something that was really the high school's job and it was argued that to establish any programme to improve the literacy of students in the University would be useless without any sort of lobbying to change the system at the high school and CÉGEP levels.¹⁶

Ideas for how the high schools and CÉGEPs might offer remedial writing instruction were floated. O'Brien speculated that one possible obstacle to their doing so rested on whether "laws existed concerning the costs for a student, who has already graduated from CÉGEP, to return to a high school or CÉGEP for a remedial course. This is, was a student in Quebec not able to take a high school course without paying for it?"¹⁷ Blame-shifting onto the CÉGEPs also figured in Concordia's student newspapers. An editorial in the September 1982 issue of *The Link* said that the UWT would expose

the relative standards of pre-university education. Students expecting to come out of CÉGEP prepared for university will be displeased to find they have not been prepared at all. English courses are compulsory at Anglophone CÉGEPs but the value of some of those courses are in doubt [sic].¹⁸

In 1983, *The Link* reiterated its position, stating that "Concordia should not be penalized for something it is not responsible for. High school and CÉGEPs are the responsible ones."¹⁹ Later, Hill was even more specific in his criticism, laying the responsibility at the doorstep of education faculty who care only about "how not what to teach."²⁰ In a 1980 report, however, Whitelaw felt that the charge was an unfair one. Having attended a pedagogical conference with some 50 or 60 CÉGEP administrators, at which writing tests and writing competence were the subject, Whitelaw concluded that "The fact remains that the colleges are making a very serious effort to improve the situation, and are working with the secondary level to try and solve this very difficult problem."²¹

The strongest if most elliptical statement of blame, however, came from the Concordia University Students' Association. A document posted in the CUSA Offices for the inspection of its committee

members in November of 1981, which called for Concordia administrators to petition the Quebec Minister of Education to change the standard in the public education system, said that:

Whereas a significant proportion of graduating students remain 'functionally' illiterate in the mother tongue even after three or more years of study at the university level; and whereas this is a result of the failure of elementary and high schools and CÉGEP programs to properly teach basic literacy skills, and of a social atmosphere which has brought about the decline of the reading and writing culture; and whereas such skills as are essential to the credibility of any university degree, as well as critical elements in the development of social awareness and leadership [it is resolved that a literacy test] for Anglophone students to be administered at least once during the first year of studies [and which must be] a condition of graduation, not of admission, in order to maintain accessibility to university education despite failures at lower levels in this matter."²²

Still, apathy related to a perceived lack of available funds was the most intransigent problem, since, as CUSA again pointed out:

[I]t is difficult for one to get enthusiastic about this debate, when we start out by saying that we are not going to spend any money. It was further stated that all of the enthusiasm up to this point has been generated on the understanding that we were definitely going to spend some money in order to face this terrible problem but it was argued that we were not facing the problem if we do not have any money with which to do anything. It was further argued that both high schools and CÉGEP's [sic] were faced with the problem of fewer students because of diminishing enrollments, [and therefore] the problem of competence in written expression would seem to fall within their areas of responsibility and the suggested process of referral might be a possible solution.²³

Other solutions for the "terrible problem" were discussed, too. One trickle-down idea suggested that the university "forget about the idea of trying to improve the students' literacy directly" and instead concentrate on strengthening the level of written expression through a general focus on improved literacy.²⁴ A second echoed the rise of Writing Across the Curriculum in contemporary US contexts by advocating for a university-wide emphasis by faculty on good writing.²⁵ Still, the idea of some kind of testing accompanied by remedial course work seemed the most practical idea.²⁶

The one point everyone in the Senate meeting that day could agree on, O'Brien thought, was that "the literacy standards at this University were not acceptable."²⁷ Actual evidence for the belief was thin, however. More than just a claim for writing skill level was at stake. Concordia University had begun life as Sir George Williams' College, an institution that in philosophy and practice mirrored the adult vocational night-school model. A view persisted, both inside and outside the university, that

Concordia was but a jumped-up version of the old vocational college, and that the students it would attract were always going to be, somehow, in that mold. Exacerbating the perception was the close proximity of McGill, a school known for its elite ranking and which, alone among Canadian universities, had declined to participate in a 1980 nation-wide survey of the writing-related tests and programs in place in Canadian universities.²⁸

Too, the increasing numbers of international students enrolling at Concordia seemed to offer hope for shedding the old legacy. After all, international students had no pre-existing framework of association, and they offered a valuable source of revenue with which to finance the resources that would help in concrete ways to effectively change the university's status. Still, however, the Senate was alert to backsliding, and the nature of its alertness was fixed especially on the writing of its undergraduate students: "if we take ourselves as a University seriously, we should really be implementing every single one of the suggestions and recommendations in the Report on Competence in Written Expression"²⁹

The UWT's Realization: "Imponderables and Unknown Factors"

In the first years of the 80s, the internal conversation over where blame could properly be placed for the writing crisis dragged on, with most of it continuing to be transferred to Canadian high schools and Quebec CÉGEPs generally—only now, for the first time, Anglophone CÉGEPs specifically. An editorial in the Sept. 1982 issue of *The Link* repeated the by-now standard claim that the UWT would expose the "relative standards of pre-university education. Students expecting to come out of CÉGEP prepared for university will be displeased to find they have not been prepared at all. English courses are compulsory at Anglophone CÉGEPs but the value of some of these course are in doubt."³⁰ The editorial ends by puckishly (and in light of later events, perhaps presciently) claiming that "the administration is no doubt planning to apply the test to faculty. Failures will be tossed out on their ears."³¹

Financial concerns over the cost of testing, along with other issues, continued to dominate Senate conversations. As the University Senate report of Sept. 18, 1982 noted, "imponderable and unknown factors" continued to abound (p.19). A partial list of the problems discussed by the senators included hidden costs associated with the administration of the system and the review procedure; the possibility of eliminating English courses in the Mature Student programme; increasing the class size in remedial courses; and the setting up of a group of people to monitor the system, discern problems that might arise, and make recommendations to Senate. (p. 19)

There was also, in the same report, the many-sided question of what to do with students who passed a course but failed the UWT or vice versa (p. 18).³² Another equally thorny issue arose around what to do with Francophone students who applied for exemption from the English-only UWT. An internal memorandum dated Nov. 25, 1982, discusses a proposal that Canadian Francophone students—and only Canadian Francophone students—should not be allowed to seek an exemption from the UWT on the basis of a passing grade on the Canadian English Language Development Test (CELDT). The proposal was frankly assessed as “both illogical and discriminatory . . . [and ultimately] extremely difficult to defend” (p. 3). Perhaps inevitably, however, money for the test—where it was coming from, and how much, and at what other programmatic expense—was the recurring theme. Going back to the September 18, 1982 report, there is found a reminder to the Senate that the University was basically at the mercy of a federal government intent on “tighten[ing] the financial screw next year,” and there was “no real way . . . [to say] where the money would or would not come from” (p. 20).

Still, the report notes “the time has come for the University to commit itself . . . and it would be shameful indeed, after all of the discussions that have taken place at various Faculty Councils and Senate, not to go ahead at this point” (p. 21). By November 4, the Senate passed a motion making the test mandatory for all undergraduate students entering the university as of September 1, 1983.

Despite the ongoing worries, and even before the test was approved in November, by September of 1982 the UWT requirement was being widely publicized. *The Link* quoted O’Brien promoting the test as “a basic keystone in the system” and Whitelaw, at that time the associate vice-rector in charge of academic planning, as saying, somewhat grandly, that Concordia’s UWT will address the “continent-wide concern” over writing skills. The publicity surrounding the UWT’s unveiling was not restricted to campus, or even to Montreal. O’Brien received a memorandum on October 11, 1982, listing the media outlets that had published or broadcast the UWT story. The outlets included not just the *Montreal Gazette* (2 articles) and the *Globe and Mail* as well as the *Toronto Star*, but also the Canadian Press Wire Service, the United Press Canada Wire Service, CBC Radio, and four other radio stations.

The idea that students arrived ill-prepared for the tasks ahead of them was an important one in the construction of a young university’s reputation, and in Concordia’s case it became a catalyst in the creation of its self-assigned new role as a leader in the writing reform movement. The energetic proponent of the latter image, Professor Hill, was quoted in articles appearing in both local and national newspapers. In one *Gazette* article, he advertised the UWT as a student-driven measure

designed to guarantee the value of their degrees and Concordia as one of “damned few” universities to implement writing competency measures.³³ A second *Gazette* article begins with “congratulations to Concordia University for seeing that its graduates can read and write” while questioning why the university should have to, when “high schools, or at least CEGEPS, should already have done the job.”³⁴ The paper holds up John Adams and the Puritans as models “that laid great stress on literacy to assure access to the Bible, and there were schools in Canada that stressed it for the same reason during the last century. But surely the demands of our advancing technology, frequently blamed for a decline in literacy, in fact make it more exigent than ever.”³⁵ The *Globe and Mail* took a similarly congratulatory tone toward Concordia’s “fight” against illiteracy, quoting CUSA member James Griffin as saying that poor writing was “very widespread” among students.

Conclusion: The First UWT

Under the supervision of the test’s chief administrator, Assistant Professor Harry Hill from Concordia’s Department of English, those first 64 students were required to read a short article and to write a 300- to 500-word response. Faculty readers scored the responses against a definition of writing competence that assessed whether “the student is capable of writing in an organized, coherent, and grammatically correct form an essay based on material provided for that purpose” (*The Thursday Report*, Sept. 30, 1982, np). Only 22 of the 64 writers passed.

Under the headline, “Students bomb lit test,” *The Link* reported that the results were “a little bit frightening.” However, the failure rates seemed to confirm what some had predicted. Exacerbating this rocky start was the fact that only 59 of approximately 5000 eligible newly admitted first-year students had turned out for the test, despite an information campaign that had emphasized the UWT’s importance as a prerequisite for graduation which should be taken during the first semester of a student’s program (Whitelaw Nov. 21, 1983, p. 2)³⁶

On one hand, the nearly 60% failure rate of the first session offers a seeming vindication of the successive committees that had petitioned for the diversion of more university resources to writing improvement. On the other, it seems natural to wonder if a high failure rate were not a foregone conclusion, given the events that culminated in the test.

In thinking about the implications the UWT’s story carries for today’s writing programs, two major points present themselves. First, the record reveals the degree to which major administrative decisions can be influenced by popular beliefs about student writing, no matter how scanty or slanted the evidence. Second, the story of the UWT’s inception begs for follow-up—it lasted, after all, for

eighteen years before finally being dismantled. In continuing our work on the sequel to this narrative, we hope to show how the next phase of the UWT continues to reveal evolving attitudes toward writing pedagogy as well as its intersections with the interests of academic administrators.

Endnotes

1. Senate meeting transcription (print), January 5, 1987, p. 3. Concordia University Archives.
2. Committee on Written Expression (Final Report) April 1980, Appendix B, p. 8
3. Reference to the AFC report appears in Appendix B of the Committee on Written Expression's final report (April 1980, p. 2).
4. The 1974 Senate record (File 745-2-D9, p.3) contains evidence that one of its members, a Barbara Opala, produced another report. Barbara Opala's report, "An annotated selected bibliography of publications of interest to teachers of remedial English," was not found in the course of this research.
5. The primary-source Financial Times of Canada reference could not be found in the course of this research, nor could any further information about English 209. Speculating about why 209 was never offered, one of the scholars who peer-reviewed this essay wondered if "this too [might be] part of the recurring history of literacy crises: alarm followed by proposals which are not enacted."
6. In the foreword to its 1977 report, the UCCC references an earlier version of itself, a report submitted to Senate in May of 1975 (File US-75-5-D22). This file was not found in the course of the present research. In any case, the 1977 report notes that "pressures of other business" prevented the uptake of the writing issue at Concordia until 1976, when the present version of the UCCC was formed (CWE report, p.2).
7. US-80-13-D3 University Curriculum Coordinating Committee, UCCC188-D1 file
8. The continuing emphasis on competence in written English may be misleading. It was not that Concordia administrators were not concerned about written competence of their French students—in a letter to the Senate Chair J.W. O'Brien, Whitelaw says

I would like to point out that attention to competence in written expression in French on the part of francophone students is a new element, and that the information used in establishing the model is drawn from the experience of English-language universities. In other words, further study of specific procedures and mechanisms in the area of competence in French is required, and that is why the Committee is suggesting that priority in determining costs be given to competence in English. It will at the same time be realized that in the present context the model does not hang together without a corresponding provision in French. (Whitelaw, Dec. 9, 1980, US-80-13-D3).

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid, p. 4.

11. In terms of the UWT's timeline to realization, the final report submitted by the Committee on Written Expression is important on several fronts: as a historiography, as a rationale, and as a planning document for writing at Concordia. However, it is important for us to note that at this point in our archival reconstruction, confusion frequently arose between the Committee on Written Expression and the Competence (and sometimes Competency) in Written Expression committee and report. Both appear in the official record as CWE, and at times the only way we could determine the distinction was by chronology—the latter having produced reports in the mid- to late-70s, the former producing a final report in 1980.

12. In any case, the Final Report produced by the Committee on Written Expression ties together in economical fashion the activities of the various committees preceding it, which is excerpted here almost in its entirety to help the reader understand a complicated timeline:

The most recent major submission relevant to the “written expression” question was a set of recommendations from the University Curriculum Coordinating Committee on Competence in Written Expression (UCCC-116-D1, sent to the Chairman of the Senate September 13, 1978). This set of recommendations was approved by Senate on September 22, 1978. The Dean of Division I was given the responsibility of implementing one of the main recommendations. No action was taken again until October 15, 1979 when the Vice-Rector Academic [Whitelaw] established another committee on Competency in Written Expression. This committee's express mandate was to implement recommendation 4 of US78-10-D9, which called for:

The development of a thoroughly dependable diagnostic test . . . [etc]

13. Papers of James Whitelaw. Report from the Senate Minutes of July 22, 1981. p.12.

14. Ibid p. 11.

15. Ibid p. 12

16. CÉGEP is the acronym for Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel. CÉGEPS are designed to serve as the first portal to higher education after Quebec students graduate from secondary school. In this way, they provide preparatory pre-university education; as well, they offer a variety of technical programs. Graduating students receive a diploma.

17. Ibid p. 13

18. James Whitelaw's papers, Competence in Written Instruction, Concordia Archives Box HA1633

19. The Link Vol. 3 No. 8 28-09-1982

20. The Link 9-4-83
21. The Link Vol. 5 No. 4 17-09-84
22. James Whitelaw's papers, Competence in Written Instruction, Concordia Archives Box HA1633
23. US-81-10-D3
24. Ibid, p. 13
25. Ibid p.16
26. Ibid p 16
27. Ibid p. 16
28. Ibid p16
29. Competence in Written Expression Canadian University Survey 1980 Appendix A Whitelaw papers Box HA 1633
30. Ibid p.17
31. The Link Vol 3 No 8 28 September 1982
32. Ibid. Questions about faculty competence had already been discussed in the university senate (j w papers, HA 1633, p 14)
33. Montreal Gazette Oct 6 1982 page 3
34. Montreal Gazette Oct 7 1982
35. Montreal Gazette Oct 7 1982
36. US-81-7-D8 p. 2 James Whitelaw's papers. Of approximately 7000 new students, roughly 2000 were exempt from the UWT based on approximate calculations done by the University Curriculum Coordinating Committee: 400 ESL students, 1,000 Francophone students, 200 certificate students, and 400 B. Eng. Students. See also the report on the first session of the UWT, on p. 2 of Whitelaw's papers of Nov. 21 1983.

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