

# U of A revamps English programs

CATHERINE SCOTT  
News Staff

As part of a campus-wide attempt to improve writing instruction and skills at the University of Alberta, several initiatives are being undertaken by the Writing Task Force (WTF) and the Writing Initiatives Team (WIT) at the U of A.

One of the WTF's ideas is to offer alternative course options. As it stands, the six-credit, full-year English courses that are currently required of most first-year students focus mainly on literature, with varying degrees of focus on writing. These would be a sequence of two courses: one an exploring writing course, and the other a writing-intensive course in any applied discipline.

Co-chair of the WTF and director of WIT Betsy Sargent noted that if these alternatives existed, students could take two of the proposed three-credit, half-year courses that would focus on writing as a subject matter, theory, and practice in terms of the discipline they choose.

Sargent explained that if students are able to apply writing in terms of the new discipline, it will help them understand how writing differs depending on the subject area.

An exploring writing course being offered this fall will introduce students to the field of writing studies and research of writing processes. It's a three-credit, half-year course intended for first-year students;

however, to date, there is no writing-intensive follow-up course.

Sargent said that in the future, it's intended for students to continue with a three-credit, writing-intensive course in another discipline, whether that be English, History, Philosophy, or Sociology. Sargent also said that such courses might not be restricted to the Faculty of Arts.

"The Faculty of Science is looking at the possibility of creating some writing-intensive courses for their new Science 100 program," she explained.

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DR BETH VIRTANEN  
WRITING INITIATIVES TEAM

Dr Beth Virtanen, who joined the WIT this year, is responsible for the creation of a Centre for Writers, another initiative aimed at improving the writing competencies of students, staff, and faculty of the U of A. Virtanen stressed that since such a centre doesn't exist yet, there's still a lot of research that needs to be

done on the matter. As such, she plans on visiting the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia to gather some ideas and concepts for a writing centre.

"I'm hoping to visit their multiple writing centres to see exactly how [they] work and look at how we could modify their plans [to best] meet the needs here. You can't say that one campus has 'the model,'" she said.

She also noted that she will take foreign language into consideration, pointing out that Canada is a bilingual country and that the population of the U of A is very multi-lingual. Virtanen believes that the complex linguistic environment should be a factor in the planning and construction of the Centre for Writers.

Virtanen explained that "when you have language issues, there are deeper personal and political issues involved," and that these issues need to be addressed "throughout the planning and throughout the implementation."

She also said that the Centre for Writers will work on addressing the writing needs of many of the modern languages that are taught at the U of A, and that the writing centre must be available to everyone in the University community.

"When we seek to discover something new, it is often through writing that we come to knowledge. You're looking at a concern, not just about students, but a concern about helping to support knowledge across the board."

## NEWS BRIEF

### GENDER ROLES MINIMAL WHEN TEACHING READERS

In a recent reading exam conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), male elementary students demonstrated lower scores overall compared to their female counterparts.

According to Dr Herb Katz, a professor in elementary education at the University of Alberta, the diminishing number of male teachers has traditionally been correlated to boys' underachievement in literacy, prompting government-initiated programs to attract more prospective male teachers in Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

However, Katz's recent study, published in the May 2007 issue of *Sex Roles*, has concluded that the gender of a teacher has no significant effect on the degree of improvement in boys' literacy skills.

"Good teaching trumps teachers' gender and other independent variables that effect reading achievement and motivation," he said.

Katz, along with his research partner Dr Laura Sokal from the University of Winnipeg, designed a 22-week intervention study to examine the effects of a teacher's gender on boys' reading skills.

In the study, undergraduate Education students served as male and female research assistants, and were paired with third- and fourth-grade male students. In one-on-one sessions, the research assistants focused on dual reading, where the tutor and student read simultaneously. They found that

teacher gender had little effect on the boys during the one-on-one sessions, leading Katz to believe that increasing the number of male teachers isn't a viable solution for underachievement. Instead, he explained that the one-on-one sessions themselves have resulted in drastic improvement of reading skills in the boys studied.

"Boys' reading achievement grew beyond what would be expected under normal school conditions," Katz said. "We speculated that this might be because most boys—most children in school—do not benefit from one-on-one attention as the boys in our sample did. Children in school are most often taught in groups."

Katz added that by receiving dependable and consistent attention, a trusting relationship develops between the students and the teacher, regardless of gender. This relationship, he continued, sets the foundation for effective learning. However, Katz said the current program in elementary education at the U of A doesn't fully accommodate for the training necessary to promote elementary students' success in reading.

"The BEd program in elementary education at the U of A is woefully inadequate in providing quality training to develop reading skills in school children. Our program is one of the very few in Canada with such a minimal requirement in literacy teaching preparation for its teachers-to-be."

However, Katz stressed that this study isn't conclusive. "To adequately test any hypothesis about [teachers' genders], you'd need a much broader set of studies covering more grades over a longer period, and look at the classroom more holistically."

—Caroline Lee, News Writer

## CAMPUS CRIME BEAT

Compiled by Cody Civiero

### IT WAS GOLLUMSES WHO TRESPASSED!

On the afternoon of 17 September, a suspicious male was observed talking to himself and was reported to CSJ. Officers attended the area and located and identified a 43-year-old male. He had previously trespassed and had an extensive criminal record. He was served with a summons for trespassing and escorted off the property.

### JUST WAITING FOR MOM

At 7pm on 17 September, a male youth was spotted loitering by the bike

racks outside of the south side of the Business building. He was identified and determined to have an extensive criminal record, including previous incidents of trespassing. He also disclosed that the bike he was riding did not belong to him. He was arrested, charged with trespassing and underage smoking, and released into the custody of his guardian.

### DON'T DRINK THE VODKA HERE

On 20 September at about 4:30pm, an unknown male was observed in a lunchroom on the fourth floor of the Old Arts building going through cupboards. A staff member approached him, asked him to leave, and was handed back water that had been removed from the cupboards. The male then left the area. He's described as 50-60 years old, 5'6", 130 pounds, wearing jeans and a grey t-shirt

and smelling of alcohol.

### A PRETTY SWEET SCORE

A vehicle parked at Physical Education East was broken into on the morning of 21 September. A bag containing work files, a cellphone, an iPod, and other items was stolen.

### SONIC THE HEDGEHOG STRIKES AGAIN

The theft of a ring valued at approximately \$750 from the fourth floor of the Old Arts building was reported on 21 September at 2pm.

### I'M TRYING TO PAINT MY ART

On 22 September between 9-10am, persons unknown keyed a truck parked in the Education carpark. Damage to the vehicle is estimated at over \$1000. CSS has no leads at this time.



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