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### The Spark, Volume 2 Issue 8

Connecticut College

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

# THE SPARK

May 10, 79

## Student Writing Skills

Bruce Liebman

In view of the national concern about the decline of writing skills, one might ask what the state of writing is at Conn., traditionally a school with a strong liberal arts program. For several reasons it is poor. The fault lies not with any one department, or in a reputed lower quality of recent freshman classes. Rather, the fault appears to be the students' unawareness to the fact that writing is a tremendously important skill requiring constant improvement. THE SPARK interviewed seven prominent teachers in various humanities departments, and while all of the seven cautioned against making generalizations, they did feel that they have not been pleased with students' written work. This mediocre writing, including grammatical mistakes, faulty logic, and poor organization, has been increasing in recent years. It is important to note that this decline is not easily quantifiable, and has been spread out over more than just a few years. Ironically, several teachers stated that recent freshman classes have been just as talented as the entering classes of ten years ago.

A small college is generally thought more conducive to faculty-student conferences. Large universities must provide remedial courses in English, something Conn. does not have to do. One of the main problems Conn. does seem to have is that students are not utilizing to their maximum advantage close teacher access.

"The system here can work. When it doesn't work, it's almost always the fault of the student not really understanding how the college can serve him," said one Government professor. In addition, he pointed out, "there is a reluctance to be criticized."

One English teacher went farther in focusing on students' raw writing skills. "When I first got here to teach, the students wrote pretty badly and by and large they still do when they first get here." He stated there are a few fundamental problems of basic illiteracy but that on the whole students are not less talented than years back. The key problems are student motivation and disappointment over a bad grade. This professor continued on this theme:

"I've been pleased in any number of cases to see someone who began as a freshman not terribly sophisticated about writing and who ended as a senior with a more than serviceable prose style. But I think it's still a case of many of our senior English majors graduating with just slightly more than rudimentary prose ability....a C<sup>t</sup> paper means not just that this is a C<sup>t</sup> performance in a particular skill, the writing of prose, but it says 'I may be a C<sup>t</sup> person.' One of the goals of education should be to cultivate a distance between the writing and the person." Moving beyond insufficient motivation to seek out teachers, there is the realization that there are no rewards for good writing, and while there is a "premium on style, it's the style of bureaucratic prose.....a lot of

Latinize abstractions for good old Anglo-Saxon words. There are rewards for that and it's counterproductive," he said.

Another English professor felt that the college has been infected with the cultural virus that writing is no longer important. "It's (writing skill) probably half and half," she commented. "And I would say that since I've been here at the college all these years, obviously it's worse now, because all over the country writing skills have been declining."

On the crucial question of whether a sufficient number of students improve, this professor said, "I think I have to say I'm satisfied although I'm often not. We (the faculty) obviously talk about this a great deal and we agree that students who can't think it matters can't be made to believe it....Who wants to be a policeman? That's not what you're supposed to do in college."

The "not wanting to be a policeman" is consistent with the college's educational role of advanced study. But students read this teacher attitude in the way one English major put it: "They just rip the papers apart without telling you how to improve." Thus a Catch-22 aspect has entered the picture. Teachers have been so convinced that students can't write, and the students perceive this negative attitude as providing no hope for their own improvement. Thus the "why bother?" feeling.

Continued on page 7

# Closing remarks

As the end of the year approaches and THE SPARK puts out its last issue of the semester, perhaps some final remarks concerning the 1978-1979 year are in order.

SGA started the year somewhat disorganized in its goals and intentions, but has strongly unified itself and has handled several difficult situations fairly well. The most important of these is the infirmity issue. It is hard to say what is behind this issue in the administration's mind, but regardless of the reasons for closing down this part of the school, the student body does have a right to have some input in the matter. Janice Mayer and the SGA acted appropriately in organizing with the trustees against the administration on this issue. President Ames has overstepped his authority in so totally disregarding the students, and SGA has taken the courage to censure him for this.

The administration's attitude on this matter seems to be the same as on many of the issues which the student's have been concerned with. SGA attempted to send out letters to parents notifying them of the infirmity change, yet the administration would not give them the list of addresses needed to send the letters. We should not be surprised by this, for President Ames has rarely been willing to take the student body's opinions seriously, re. the skating rink. THE SPARK commends SGA for taking action, whatever affect it may have.

It is our hope that the students take a serious attitude on the new SGA, and give Mike Litchman a chance before judging him. This year's elections have been somewhat less than encouraging, but we should not condemn before reason is given.

\* \* \*

I have felt that THE SPARK has made an effort to present some of the provocative issues on campus this past year. As editor, it has not been my intention to offend or to shock, but merely to act as an editorial forum so that students might have a place to state their views, and to thereby encourage inquiry and motivation into those problems which have concerned the students as well as the faculty. I wish to thank all those who have given THE SPARK their support. The editor for 1979-1980 will be Josh Lyons. ■

*Donald F. Goldberg*

*May, 1979*

## THE SPARK

VOLUME II / ISSUE EIGHT

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This edition of THE SPARK is the last of the semester and was entirely edited and produced by Don Goldberg.

THE SPARK welcomes and encourages letters from its readers on any and all subjects which are relevent to the College, or on articles or letters which have appeared within this journal. Letters should be sent to THE SPARK  
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06320

THE SPARK is a student-run journal or editorial and literary content dedicated to presenting student and faculty opinion on campus-related subjects.

# Conference on Oceanic Affairs

Josh Lyons

While some 3500 concerned citizens were protesting the launching of the Trident submarine, approximately eighty students were discussing other uses of the seas. The Coast Guard Academy sponsored a student conference on the Law of the Seas during the weekend of April 6 and 7. The conference included besides the students a few people from Oregon. The faculty contributing to the event are all renowned in the field of the law of the seas. They have all attended the ongoing Law of the Sea Conference in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Conference's official name was the STUDENT CONFERENCE ON OCEAN AFFAIRS (SCOA). All participants had their choice of one of six roundtable discussion sections ranging from navigation to marine research and preservation. As well, there were two key note speakers, Senator Pell from Rhode Island and former ambassador John Moore. S.C.O.A. was entirely conceived and run by Coast Guard students, headed by David Medina and John McCann.

The present Law of the Sea Conference in Geneva has been ongoing since 1973, making great strides towards its goal of an international treaty dealing with the laws regulating the use of the world's most valuable resource, the oceans. S.C.O.A. was an attempt by students to gain a better understanding and in-

sight into the issues confronting the Geneva Conference and the future laws of the seas. The student participants debated the actual informal text of the Geneva conference. Questions and conflicts arose and were resolved in the roundtable sessions.

Some of the questions and conflicts discussed in the roundtable sessions conducted by professors who had all been to the Geneva conference were similar to the actual conflicts at the international conference.

One such conflict comes under the heading of navigation. A coastal state's territorial sea is an area of coastal water that does not allow foreign ships, submarines, or planes to infiltrate the area without prior permission of the coastal state. There is no universal limit for territorial seas. Some countries, such as the U.S., have a three mile territorial limit while some other countries have a 200 mile limit. The problem arises during times of war. In 1973 the U.S. wanted to send supplies to Israel. No European countries would allow the U.S. to fly over them. There seemed no way to reach Israel with supplies. Since the U.S. claims only a three mile limit, it only recognized the three mile limit of both Morocco and Spain, but this still left seven miles of disputed airspace over which the U.S. wanted to fly. Was the Morr-

occan and Spanish three-plus limit legal? No one knew, but the need for a universal limit is justified. Another question raised was that of pollution control, and whether there is a need for pollution control. At present, there are no international regulations for pollution control.

Each roundtable section debated topics relevant to their broad discussion topic. At the end of the Conference there was a plenary session. At this session, each roundtable discussed the changes in the informal text that they would make, as well as the sound points of the text. To add to the S.C.O.A. conference, Senator Pell of R.I. who is well versed in the laws of the seas, and the former ambassador to the Geneva conference, John Moore. Moore was the final speaker at the closing banquet. He tied up the loose ends and added an impressive official touch to the weekend's events.

The Coast Guard Academy should be commended for its hospitality as host to over eighty participants in this unique event. The S.C.O.A. staff deserve many congratulations for running an interesting and informative conference. These two authors enjoyed it immensely and learned many new things from it, and look forward to next year's S.C.O.A. event. Interaction of this kind should be encouraged. ■

## Letters

Dear Editor:

This is in response to the letter anonymously submitted in your last issue regarding the House-fellow selection procedure. It is obvious that the writer exhibited a high degree of irresponsible journalism by commenting on an issue from a position of ignorance. The letter suggested a division between the housefellows and the Selection Committee whereby the former eliminated the number of applicants from seventy to thirty, leaving the latter group to choose

the final twenty as house-fellows for the coming year. To set the record straight, there was no such separation, as the Committee fully participated with the House-fellows in narrowing the original field of candidates. Although most of the information provided at this stage of the selection process resulted from the applicants' interviews with Dean Watson and the housefellows, the Committee was assured of equal input by reserving the right to review any individuals they felt were controversial. In other

words, the Committee exercised leeway with respect to all the candidates instead of the ten persons falsely stated by your anonymous author.

I am not contending that the new process for housefellow selection is perfect. I believe that all who contributed their time recognize the need for certain changes. Future improvement is dependent on thoughtful comment by the student body rather than reckless criticism generated from a bitter source.

Barry Gold ■

# Language debate

Kenny Goldstein

There have been no foreign language requirements at Connecticut College since 1973. Today, a student may choose between an English course, or a course in any of nine foreign languages to complete "Area Three," the language and literature section of the core requirements for graduation. Now, action has begun to change this extremely limited emphasis on foreign language.

Recently, Connecticut College received a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities to allow Germaine Bree, Kenan Professor of the Humanities at Wake Forest University, and reknown authority on foreign language study, to come to Conn. to evaluate our language departments. Professor Bree came the week of January 21, and met with representatives of students, faculty, and administration. After detailed observation she submitted a report which suggested possible courses of action for the improvement of foreign language study at Conn.

These suggestions, although not insistant of the reinstatement of a foreign language requirement, do recommend that "the position of language programs in the core curriculum now under consideration be carefully defined." This, in effect, means that the entire language situation should be re-evaluated and the possibilities of new programs be explored. These new programs include a foreign language requirement or a new emphasis on interdisciplinary foreign language programs, or both.

The alternatives outlined by Professor Bree are now being discussed by a standing committee made up of representatives of the language departments (including the English and Classics departments). The Academic and Administrative Procedures Board has pro-

mised to review the foreign language situation at their Fall meeting. In the meantime plans are being made to form an Ad Hoc student/faculty committee to discuss Bree's suggestions and consider the futrue of foreign language study at this school.

Professor Mary Louise Lord of the Classics Department has so far lead the way for the changes. She acted as the coordinator for Professor Bree's visit and is now calling for the improvement of foreign language study in this way: "I think the need for the study of foreign language has become clear through the recent problems in American foreign affairs. As a nation we are at a disadvantage in not knowing foreign cultures in their own medium.

"Because of the recent lack of emphasis on foreign language study in the U. S., Americaa students are missing out. Government, Anthrology, and Art students all should realize they need foreign language to improve themselves in their own disciplines. Besides that, a foreign language is a worthy discipline in itself"

Clearly, Mrs. Lord is correct in her assertion that foreign language can be beneficial to the study of many other disciplines. However, this does not necessarily mean foreign language requirements should be instated. Such a program would mean hardship for those students who do not see foreign language as a benefit to their major and to those who have excessive difficulty with the study of language. Instead, I feel that the interdisciplinary aspects of Professors Bree's suggestions should be explored. One interdisciplinary program discussed in the report which was interesting was the so-called "Extended-Major Program" now being used at Middlebury College. Extended-majors are study programs designed

to combine the study of a foreign language with another discipline. These extended-majors are quite intensive and often include study abroad in the Junior year. Extended-majors proposed at Middlebury include: Anthropology/Spanish (with a semester in Bogata), History/Chinese, History/ French, and Philosophy/German.

The Philosophy/German major, for example, goes something like this: 1. Basic German courses completed by the end of the sophomore year, 2. Two basic Philosophy courses also to be completed by the end of the sophomore year, 3. Specialized Philosophy courses in the summer between sophomore and junior years, 4. Junior semester in Mainz studying philosophy with two electives, 5. Advanced thesis-level Philosophy courses at Middlebury.

I feel that a program like the extended-majors program will be effective and less constricting in improving foreign language at Connecticut College, and would be more effective than a basic language requirement. The advantages of foreign language study are many. Certainly, these advantages have been overlooked in recent years.■

**WCNI**

**91.5**

**FM**

**LISTEN!**

# Run, don't jog

David Rosenberg

No jogging. The racy green warm-up suit hung limp on my limbs. The nylon blue Nikes quivered. No jogging in the Arboretum, God, that's like no potato salad at the Dutch. No jogging in the Arboretum, that's the rule, and they're enforcing it. The first time I saw that sign, I said, "What the hell, they're not going to get in the way of my health. Let's see them stop me." My legs limbered as I headed down the hill. My stride peaked as I crossed the level green field. The wood chips crunched under the waffle like soles of the Nikes and the wind off the pond spit in my face. My lungs rejoiced as my head communed with Nature. The serenity of the moment was destroyed by a piercing whine. Glancing over my shoulder I noticed a flashing red light connected to the handle bars of a dirt bike being piloted by the redheaded Pinkie lady. "All right, pull over buddy, this is Arbo Patrol."

What could I do, there was no way to out run that dirt bike, and I really didn't feel like going for a swim in the pond. I stopped. "All right, you

got me red handed lady. I'm sorry."

"Look buster, sorry isn't good enough when it comes to campus safety rules. What do you think life is, a bowl of cherries?" She whipped out her ticket book and started writing away. It was a five dollar fine.

"Ah come on, can't you cut me a break? This is my first offense, how about just a warning?"

"You kids are just too lax. You must learn to respect the rules. Consider yourself lucky that I'm just giving you this citation. I should be

locking you up in the Pinkie Shack for the night." At that moment a woman burst by us, powerfully. This girl was moving.

"Hey, wait a minute, what about her? Aren't you going to give her a ticket?"

"You kidding, that's Jan Merrill, track star."

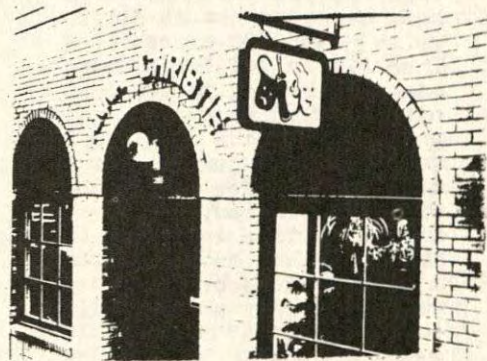
"You trying to tell me that she gets special privileges?"

"No. She doesn't jog, she runs."

I learned my lesson, I don't jog anymore. I walk. ■

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# Tips for goofing off

Jake Green

This is a piece of fiction. If the narrator resembles anybody real, it is purely accidental.

If you're going to waste time, you should do it properly. So here are a few suggestions from an expert. First of all, set your alarm for 9:31. This way you have no reason, hope, or excuse to go to your 9:30 class. Then lie in bed for a few minutes, trying to organize how you're going to goof off for the day. At 9:45 have the janitor bring you coffee and doughnuts in bed. Even though it is a long way from your bed to the outside of your door where your newspaper awaits you struggle out of bed and get the paper. Then crawl back into bed, read the paper, drink your coffee, and enjoy your doughnuts. At 10:00 just when your government professor is lecturing about a truly exciting topic - tax legislation, for instance - when most of the class is looking at their watches every thirty seconds, you are nestled under the covers, reading the sports page. There is no rush to get out of bed. However, by 10:15 or so, after you've read about Reggy Jackson's ego, it really is time to get up. If you have a 10:30 class, figure that you won't have time to make it, because you have to spend at least 15 minutes in the shower. If you take a quick, assume that the class is cancelled. This is usually a good time of day to listen to your neighbor (if you live in the complex, you can listen to the person eight doors down from you) play with his girlfriend or tinker toys. It depends on your neighbor. Giggling and heavy breathing are always fun to listen to, especial-

ly if you have a glass handy. By 10:30 it is time to go to the post office. Carefully read all of your junk mail, then read the ride board, even if you're not going away. It's always nice to know who will be leaving for the weekend: it gives you something to look forward to. Hustle back to your dorm's t.v. room by 11:00 in time for "Happy Days." It is a very educational show, and you can always throw in something about the Fonz on a philosophy exam if you get desperate. If you haven't done any reading for a philosophy course, try to forcefully argue, using at least five episodes of "Happy Days," why the Fonz is a true existentialist.

Now it is time for lunch. Try to beat the 11:30 rush. During the week Harris offers a continental cuisine. I recommend it highly. At lunch, while your friends are arguing about the government lecture you slept through, you are at liberty to tell them about what the Fonz did. Also, with the Times still fresh in your mind, you can dazzle them with your knowledge. Have at least three cups of coffee, trying to stretch out lunch from 11:30 until 1:00.

After lunch it is time to go to the post office again, even though there is no chance of receiving any more mail. Still, you can reread the ride board. The bookstore is always a good place to waste time in. Skim through a few of your favorite magazines. Around 2:00 head over to Cro to play a little pinball.

After pinball, since you've had such a strenuous day, it is time for your afternoon nap. Try to sleep from 2:30 to 4:30. For those of you who can't sleep there are always the soaps. They run all afternoon, and try to find a good color t.v. to watch them on.

4:45 is predinner cocktail time. Before you eat in Harris, have a Molson or two in the bar. This way you won't have to taste the food. After dinner it is time to watch the sports report on t.v. It's always very important to see how the Yankees and Red Sox are doing. This is a part of your education as well. At 7:00 head over to the library to read a few magazines. On Wednesday and Sunday nights, especially if you have a lot of work, I advise going to the movies. You can learn a good deal from these pictures and they take up to two hours as well. After the movie you can hang out in Cro. Try to pick a good table so you can gossip with your friends about who walks in and out. I prefer the middle tables, mostly because you're right in the center of things. After you've spent two hours in Cro, it's time for a nightcap in the bar. Finally, as you're walking back to your room for a late night poker session, pat yourself on the back. After all, you've accomplished so much, and you've done it with such style and don't forget to set your alarm for 9:31. ■

### Student writing cont.

Although the English department cares about correctness, other departments are not as tenacious in criticizing writing flaws. Obviously, only a concerted effort by all departments working on the problem will yield any positive results. As the previous English teacher pointed out, "my students assure me that when I give them Fs and say their writing is illogical, unclear, fuzzy, whatever, they say they get Bs in all their other courses."

One Religious Studies professor, while deploring the way students develop an argument, said, they most often state something as if it were obvious, and haven't been clear how they arrived at that conclusion." He conceded that at times grading is less rigorous, and that flaws are overlooked in the style simply "to make allowances for this whole group of students simply not being

able to write with the same precision I would consider good."

Thus grade inflation. Undoubtedly it is a considerable barrier to the community's being aware that a problem even exists. A History professor, apparently unaware of grade inflation, remarked that, "we don't mark the students, we mark their work." This professor echoed the sentiments of other teachers by saying that while a large number of students improve if they are corrected, "people in general here don't want to do the grubby work of mastering the English language. They are impatient."

More than one professor believed that today's students do not think enough about language. Students are not drilled enough in their own language, and since they are not required to study another language at Conn., they lose a valuable linguistic perspective into how the English language functions. Linked perhaps to the

acquisition of good writing skills is the necessity of practicing another unrequired discipline here, that of hearing English well spoken and oral skills in general. "Why should students be allowed to say 'and stuff' and 'you know'?" asked the previous History professor.

Improving the writing level as a whole apparently will be difficult as long as divisions exist between various departments about requirements and as long as grade inflation obscures to many that there is a problem. Furthermore, since the college is in better shape than most other institutions, the problem may not even be seen as a major one. In the words of another Government professor, "I think every faculty member should come down harder, and to teach, if not writing, at least clarity of expression." ■



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# Wanderer

Jim Fuancese

Look now down  
to the solid ground:  
Feel its hardness, and how it drives you on.

No soft place  
or rest for the weary,  
only a point, and then you're long gone.

And each point is muchlike another,  
no reasonable difference for which to look.  
Only the search, to keep on moving,  
over the hill, and past a further crook.

And what is it which draws you on?  
Never ceasing always moving  
Damned peaceless soul of restless roving  
Never stopping always going  
Like a sea endless flowing-  
What is it which draws you on?

Look now down  
to the solid ground.  
Can you feel its hardness, and how it drives you on? ■

*On Wodehouse and Waugh  
and George Bernard Shaw*



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