

CANADIAN FORCES AND FRASER VALLEY COLLEGE CO-OPERATE

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Once a year, from January to March, carefully selected members from the non-commissioned ranks of the Canadian Armed Forces come to the Officer Candidate School (CFOCS) at Chilliwack, B.C. to take officer training through a special program for serving members called "commissioning from the ranks (CFR)". These members take the same program as young officer recruits, most of whom hold university degrees--with one exception. The CFR candidates also take Supplementary Communications, a course in basic writing skills, developed and taught by faculty from Fraser Valley College in Chilliwack. Over the seven years that the course has been included in the CFR program, it has grown in credibility and prestige so that during the last three or four years, an increasing number of members of the CFOCS staff, both officers and other ranks, and personnel from other sections of the Base have enrolled in the course along with the candidates. This co-operative program between a college and a base is, I think, a unique situation in Canada.

History of the Course

The idea for such a course came from a staff member of CFOCS, Capt. Bill Beswetherick, himself commissioned from the ranks, who approached Fraser Valley College in the autumn of 1978 with a request for a special course to be given by the College at CFB Chilliwack. He believed that because many of the CFR candidates had never completed their formal education before joining the Forces, they were at a disadvantage as compared with young officer cadets just entering the military, who had all completed secondary school, and usually university as well. Added to this was his recognition of the fact that officers spend a good deal of time in administrative writing, and therefore CFRs needed to upgrade their capabilities in written communication. Capt. Beswetherick's request and suggestions for general content of the course went to the Continuing Education administrator who, in consultation with college communications instructor Ken Fernstrom, hired two part-time instructors to develop and teach a pilot course for the approximately 45 CFR candidates who took officer training in early 1979. This first course was enthusiastically received and given a complimentary evaluation by both the candidates and staff of CFOCS.

As a result, in the following year the college course, named Supplementary Communications by the military to distinguish it from their writing course, Military Communications, was fully incorporated into the officer training program of CFR candidates. Since 1980, it has

formed part of their regular program of studies, and all candidates must receive a passing grade (65%) on this course in order to complete the requirements for promotion.

My Involvement in the Program

What connection do I have with this program? Well, at the time of the inception of the course and until the summer of 1981, I was the Continuing Education administrator who helped to originate the course and who supervised its operation. In 1981-1982, I took a year's leave of absence from my job, but because I wanted an opportunity to get back into the classroom, and because the number of candidates coming into the CFR program was increasing, I decided to teach one of the classes. The following year I returned to work as a faculty member rather than an administrator, and since then, by my own wish, I have taught one or two classes of Supplementary Communications each year. Over the past four years, I have instructed seven different classes of CFRs, each with from 15 to 31 students, and I have enjoyed the challenge of instructing mature students with varied backgrounds in an overview of writing skills within a relatively short time.

Course Content

The length of the course is forty hours, divided into twelve 3-hour lesson blocks, one 3-hour examination, and a one-hour exam review session, taught over a period of 8 or 9 weeks. The content was developed in consultation with staff at CFOCS and has been refined over the years to fit the needs of the candidates. Instructional materials consist of a programmed learning text, The Bare Essentials by Norton and Green, and a 30-page handbook containing supplementary lesson material and assignments prepared by the senior instructor, faculty member Wendy Burton, who also organized the course as it is taught today. (See appendix for course outline.) The course begins with instruction in and review of spelling, grammar, punctuation and sentence structure. After five sessions on mechanics, organization and development of the paragraph are introduced, and class members write 4 to 6 individual paragraphs. Next, they study word use and word choice in the development of style and tone, and write a letter in response to a complaint from a member of the public. Then they begin work on the essay, studying narrative, expository and argumentative forms. Every effort is made to tie the assignments to what the members will be doing in their careers. For instance, the narrative style is useful to them in making personnel evaluation or situational reports, while the expository form gets them writing clear instructions or directions. Finally, the students spend several sessions studying, planning and writing the argumentative essay so they will learn to use logical thinking and clear evidence in getting their ideas across. By the end of the course, class members will have written three 500-word essays as home assignments, and a fourth on the final examination. Thus, in about two months the class

will have reviewed and done work on the mechanics of writing, and then written four separate paragraphs, a letter, and four essays, all of which have been marked. They have also been evaluated with comments, often by two people, as each class has both an instructor and a teaching assistant who helps with the heavy marking load and gives individual assistance in the classroom, a necessity when classes contain between 20 and 30 students.

CFR Students a Challenge

Each group of CFR candidates presents a real challenge to an instructor. They come from every branch of the Services, from every trade and from a variety of ranks, from Master Corporal to Chief Warrant Officer. They have in common excellence in their jobs, and the ambition to get ahead. They all have a minimum of 10 years' service and often more than 20, and they have been recommended by their supervisors and picked by a Board as possessing the qualities for and capabilities of becoming officers. Therefore, the men and the occasional woman in the CFR program are generally the cream of the non-commissioned ranks who have applied for this promotional move. They are keen, intelligent, and well motivated, and also, in the words of one of them "experienced, older personnel, in most cases well read, well travelled, but set in their ways".

There are also a number of Francophones in each class with greatly varying abilities in written and spoken English, from the almost unilingual to the completely fluent bilingual. The challenge to the instructor, then, is to get across the material and keep the interest of a group of mature students with a tremendous variety of backgrounds, skills and experience. If the instructor is successful in meeting the challenge, and creates rapport and a good atmosphere for learning in her class, then working with these students can be a highlight in her teaching career. It can also be a very positive experience for the students, as they can work with and help one another to understand and improve their communication skills.

Course Credit Recently Given

Now that the course has been in operation for seven years, its effects are not only showing, but being recognized. There has been recognition over the past several years by the staff of CFOCS, because staff members who can get free of their duties for a few hours a week have been attending the course in increasing numbers. College faculty have also heard indirectly that students of previous years are visibly better in writing skills than their peers who lack the course. In addition, during the past year, the course became legitimate when the University of Manitoba granted transfer credit as English Composition 4.091 (3 credit hours). In turn, Fraser Valley College also made it a credit course, styling it Communications 150. Where before, students

had received a letter of standing from the College, this year all students will receive a transcript of their grade, thus indicating formal acceptance of this course in the College program of studies.

What's Ahead for Supplementary Communications

The future seems reasonably assured for this course, as long as funding continues to be available. We at the College consider that the Canadian Forces are getting a bargain, as they receive professional instruction for a large number of students for a short period of time, an arrangement which would be difficult for them to duplicate with their own staff. For ourselves, the instructors, we teach at Base Chilliwack because we find the experience challenging and exhilarating - and certainly a change from the normal classroom situation. We meet interesting people who have lived and travelled all over the world and share their experiences with us through their writing; we are challenged to do our very best teaching because we have intelligent, motivated students, many of whom are also instructors in their own fields; and as a side benefit, we can frequent the Officers' Mess during the course!

We know from our evaluations that most students in our classes find the course useful. Comments such as the following show the students' appreciation:

1. "This course has served to raise my confidence in my written work."
2. "My grammar may still continue to suffer, but my awareness of this has changed tremendously as a result of this course."
3. "This communications course was one of the highlights and the best learning experience for the CFRs. It increased my writing ability, which will be put to use in the very near future."
4. "In a limited time, a wide range of English has been covered. It will be of great advantage to all of us."

Therefore, it seems that both sides in this agreement, Canadian Forces personnel and College instructors, are satisfied. As long as this satisfaction continues, and the arrangement is beneficial to both sides, this fine example of co-operation between the Canadian Armed Forces and Fraser Valley College will continue.

Appendix

COURSE OUTLINE

Periods

2 - 4	Spelling Sentence Structure: Subject-Verb Identification
5 - 7	Sentence Structure: Sentence Fragments Run-On Sentences Compound and Complex Sentences
8 - 10	Grammar: Agreement in Person, Tense, Pronoun
11 - 13	Punctuation: The Comma
14 - 16	Punctuation: The Colon and Semicolon
17 - 19	Paragraphing: Organization and Development
20 - 22	Narrative Techniques
23 - 25	Diction, Tone, Word Choice
26 - 28	Expository Essay
29 - 31	Development of an Argumentative Edge
32 - 34	Logic and Evidence Constructing the Essay
35 - 37	Writing Persuasively
38 - 40	Review
41 - 43	Examination

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Betty Urquhart graduated from the University of British Columbia with majors in English, French and German, and in addition holds a professional teaching certificate. She has had extensive experience teaching adults on both secondary and post-secondary levels, and currently is a Business Communications instructor at Fraser Valley College, Chilliwack.