

“I’m not shure about her spelling ...” Introducing grammar and embedding student learning advisors in a journalism unit

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To journalism employers, the ability to spell, punctuate, use correct grammar and write clearly are key attributes that are sought from journalism graduates— but not always found (Callaghan and McManus, 2009; Sheridan Burns, 2003; Ricketson, 2001). This paper describes a problem-based learning approach aimed at improving student writing in a foundation journalism unit at Edith Cowan University. Exercises and assessments were developed to increase understanding and awareness of spelling, grammar and punctuation, using a combination strategy that embedded a student learning advisor in the unit. Students participated in intensive grammar workshops before undertaking peer editing of all written assessments, as well as editing their own work. The results of the changes were initially mixed, with many students unhappy with the attention on grammar. Final unit feedback was significantly more positive, however, showing 94 per cent of students believed the intensive grammar work would be useful or very useful for their future writing, while 72 per cent believed the editing techniques shown would be useful or very useful in improving their written work. The paper outlines the steps taken in this shift in teaching, the challenges faced, including initial student reluctance to engage, and recommendations for anyone wishing to replicate the process.

Keywords: grammar; embedding; spelling

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To journalism employers, the ability to spell, punctuate, use correct grammar and write clearly are key attributes that are sought from journalism graduates — but not always found (Callaghan and McManus, 2009; Sheridan Burns, 2003; Ricketson, 2001). This paper describes a problem-based learning approach aimed at improving student writing in a foundation journalism unit at Edith Cowan University. Exercises and assessments were developed to increase understanding and awareness of spelling, grammar and punctuation, using a combination strategy that embedded a student learning advisor in the unit. Students participated in intensive grammar workshops before undertaking peer editing of all written assessments, as well as editing their own work. The results of the changes were initially mixed, with many students unhappy with the attention on grammar. Final unit feedback was significantly more positive, however, showing 94 per cent of students believed the intensive grammar work would be useful or very useful for their future writing, while 72 per cent believed the editing techniques shown would be useful or very useful in improving their written work. The paper outlines the steps taken in this shift in teaching, the challenges faced, including initial student reluctance to engage, and recommendations for anyone wishing to replicate the process.

Introduction

In a paper presented to last year’s ECulture program, the challenges for journalism students finding employment in their field was explored in detail. The researchers had questioned ten major journalism employers in Western Australia as to what they were looking for in journalism graduates and found that while these graduates were often prized for their critical thinking skills, their enthusiasm for finding news, and their willingness to learn, employers believed a significant number could not spell or write to an appropriate standard. As one put it, “Many graduates lack a basic working knowledge of writing for newspapers and simple story construction. Some have poor writing skills and it is staggering how many cannot spell” (Callaghan & McManus, 2009). As part of that research, assessments in journalism and broadcasting were examined to see what could be altered to address these issues, and the project described in this paper builds on those findings. It looks at course changes to a foundation year journalism unit that have attempted to address the concerns of these employers. Students participated in intensive grammar workshops integrated into the unit class time, where there was increased attention paid to their technical grammar, punctuation, spelling and writing skills, and they were required to engage in peer editing as part of their assessments. All lessons were linked back to the practical use of enhanced writing skills and editing within a journalistic context, using problem-based learning techniques such as scenarios and authentic assessments to heighten

learning. The results have been assessed using student evaluation of aspects of the unit, with strong support from the students — eventually — about the value of the course changes. This paper outlines the steps taken in this shift in teaching, and considers the results, including the challenges faced. It also offers recommendations for anyone wishing to replicate the process.

The importance of writing skills for journalism students considering a journalism career cannot be underestimated, with ‘good spelling, grammar and punctuation’ ranking second only to ‘ability to learn’ in the attributes sought in graduates by potential journalism employers (Callaghan & McManus, 2009). While it is estimated only about a third of journalism graduates will go on to work in the industry (Callaghan & McManus, 2009; Hill & Tanner, 2006; O'Donnell, 1999), other employers appear to value a similar skill set. O'Reilly, Cunningham and Lester (1999) found higher written and oral communication skills were prized by advertising and public relations employers over other skills when taking on graduates (O'Reilly, Cunningham, & Lester, 1999, p. 179), while Ahles (2004) found excellent writing was the dominant professional skill nominated by public relations employers (Ahles, 2004, p. 12). There is evidence that students also put a value on the writing skills they gain in journalism courses, and may feel that more esoteric content in courses is less useful in their eventual employment than basic writing skills (Guiniven, 1998; Schneider & Andre, 2005; Thornham & O'Sullivan, 2004).

Increasing the time spent on basic writing skills is problematic, as it usually necessitates the removal of something else from the curriculum. As Ricketson (2001) states, “Some people want us to devote more time to basic grammar, because students have no idea how to use apostrophes ... The fact is that in a three-year undergraduate program, there is barely time to teach the rudiments of journalistic practice” (Ricketson, 2001, p. 96). But this practical concern must be viewed alongside the body of research that shows grammar is best taught in the language context in which it is to be used, such as in the constructivist approach taken by Weaver (1996). She argues grammar should be taught alongside its application, with frequent reference to “a wide range of examples to illustrate a concept ... and also that we must contrast these with common non-examples that are frequently mistaken for instances of the concept” (Weaver, 1996, p. 18). This supports the approach of contextual teaching using genuine industry examples as well as authentic assessment scenarios.

The challenge then for journalism educators is to find a way of maximising skill development in the area of spelling, grammar, punctuation and general writing ability — within the context of the field — while not displacing too many other critical topics within the curriculum. This requires a recognition that while the broader higher education goals of critical thinking, reflective practice, awareness of ethics and understanding of the industry are important in moulding well-rounded and professional graduates, the ‘basics’ — spelling, grammar, punctuation and general writing ability — are deal breakers when it comes to finding a job. If a student lacks these, however strong they are in other areas, they significantly reduce their chances of employment.

The project described in this paper was an attempt to address the specific concerns raised by journalism employers (and, by default, other employers) about the paucity

of writing skills among journalism graduates. The authors have seen evidence of poor writing skills among their students (both in and out of journalism units) over a number of years and combined their experience in this project to develop a new approach to teaching basic writing to journalism students. The following section outlines the process that was undertaken and gives more detail of the structural and conceptual changes made, as well as the challenges faced. We discuss the results, based on student evaluation of various aspects of the unit, and make some recommendations for anyone wishing to attempt something similar in another course.

Structural change

Prior to 2010, the Introduction to Journalism unit was offered as a second or third-year study unit for students who had already completed a year of general media studies. While open to all communications students, it was, and remains, a core unit in the journalism major. The unit was conducted in a lecture-tutorial format with a single lecturer and one or more tutors. Starting in first semester 2010, the unit has been opened to first-year students, which has had a number of implications. Enrolment numbers are up from previous years (reflecting the ongoing presence of second and third-year students as well as the first-years in this transition period) and students are drawn from a wide variety of courses, with quite diverse ambitions.

In first semester 2010, 124 students enrolled in the unit, and 109 completed it. Some 71 per cent of the students were female and just six listed international addresses on the university enrolment details. Reflecting the fact that first-years were enrolled in this unit, 37.7 per cent of the students were 19 or younger, including 12.5 per cent of students who said they were younger than 18. A further 30.6 per cent of students were aged 20-23 and 21.6 per cent were aged 24 or older. One-third of the respondents were in their first semester of university. Because the unit was open to students from other communications courses, there was a diverse mix of majors being studied; however, 59 students (59.3 per cent) were studying journalism or broadcasting either alone or in a double major, as illustrated in table one. Among non-broadcasting or journalism students, majors included mass communications, scriptwriting, public relations, politics, advertising, fashion, creative services and creative writing.

The structural changes made in the unit offered an opportunity to rethink the delivery of this unit and its content. It is now provided in a three-hour seminar/workshop format, with no formal 'lecture'. A single teacher runs the workshops, but brings in assistance as required (such as help in running in-class assessments or marking). While this teacher runs the lessons and designs the activities, a specialist learning skills advisor has been embedded in the unit, attending more than half the workshops over semester and running intensive grammar lessons as part of each lesson, usually taking one to 1.5 hours to cover a topic. As an example, week two is devoted to the discussion of nouns — a topic that is comparatively familiar to students. After an initial revision of what nouns are and the categories of nouns (which incorporates discussion of subject-verb agreement), students are encouraged to think about the journalistic implications of different noun labels, such as the use of the term 'militiaman' rather than 'freedom fighter' or 'terrorist'. This exercise has the benefit of exploring ethical and logistical issues in news reporting while illuminating the need

for the writer to be aware of and in charge of their choice of nouns, lest the wrong information be conveyed to the reader. A second exercise that requires them to substitute different noun labels to enhance meaning in sentences stresses not only the change in nuance that comes with noun choice but also the benefits to a journalistic writer of having a strong vocabulary rich in concrete nouns.

Conceptual change

Introduction to Journalism is a unit that has traditionally focused on news writing, while providing a taste of other writing formats, and exposing students to a range of theoretical ideas and an overview of the industry. The result has been a fairly ‘full’ unit that has not always been cohesive. As part of the unit changes, the concepts surrounding reporting and writing of news have now become the centrepiece of this unit, to bring it more in line with programs offered at other universities. Doing this required reduction of other elements of the unit. Feature writing and academic writing are covered extensively by other units in the course, so the decision was made to remove them from this unit, freeing up time for more detailed examination of news writing techniques. Teaching in the areas of industry practice and theory have been kept, as these are considered essential to the creation of well-rounded, reflective journalists and media consumers; however lessons in these areas have been altered to be less ‘academic’ and to allow greater student discovery of key issues and debate of concepts.

The greatest conceptual shift has been from considering writing technique as a side-issue in assessment and teaching, to making it a central part of all assessable work and lessons. For first semester, an assessment that just tested student spelling and punctuation was included, with students requiring 75 per cent to pass. This has been altered to a series of weekly tests on spelling, grammar and punctuation in second semester; however the focus on technical competence remains high. In all other assessments, at least 25 per cent of the final mark is based on the quality of spelling, grammar and punctuation. Workshops are now divided roughly in half, with the first portion taken up with discussion and exercises based around the ‘why’ and ‘what’ of journalism (discussion of where sources are found, for example, or the reasons why a story might be covered in different ways between media outlets). The second half is devoted to the ‘how’ of journalism: how to write a good sentence; how to write a strong lead; how to tighten copy; how to edit someone’s work.

Assessing the results of changes

There are a number of ways of considering the success or otherwise of changes made in the unit, including evidence of improved student performance, information gleaned informally from students about how they felt about aspects of the course, and through more formal evaluations.

Student performance

The goal of the changes in this unit was to assist students to improve their writing skills, including spelling, punctuation, grammar and sentence structure. However, measuring this was complicated by the fact that no baseline measure of spelling and grammar skills existed for students entering the unit. In a new initiative, students were given an initial online spelling and grammar quiz (primarily to get them thinking about the importance of these skills) that provides some very basic information. Asked whether a given spelling of some common words was correct, more than a quarter of students (29.5 per cent) believed that the word 'receive' was spelled 'recieve'. Some 16 per cent thought occurrence had only one 'r'. A quarter (24.4 per cent) did not believe the word 'relevant' was spelled correctly. These words were included on a list of 50 commonly misspelled words provided to students in week one and they were told they would need to sit a spelling and punctuation test later in the semester with a pass mark set at 75 per cent. The results from this assessment were surprising. The initial failure rate was 64 per cent, while those who sat it a second time had a 50 per cent failure rate. Of the 110 students who sat the test at least once, 35 failed to meet the 75 per cent cut-off for passing, and some never made 50 per cent. This high failure rate is discouraging; however it can be read in different ways. Most students who failed the first time improved enough that they passed the second time, for example, which suggests that it forced personal improvement, albeit limited, in the areas of spelling and punctuation. Learning skills advisors also reported that they saw more students wanting specific remedial help on their punctuation, which is a positive outcome. Certainly, the focus on this particular assessment highlighted to students the importance of spelling, grammar and punctuation in communication degrees.

Student perception

If actual improvement in performance was difficult to determine, student attitudes towards the changes in the course were abundantly clear, with a distinct shift in sentiment over the course of semester. Students were initially unhappy with the focus on grammar, as evidenced by a high number of complaints registered on feedback forms issued in week four. Asked 'what's not working', around a fifth of students complained about grammar lessons in some way, usually saying they found the topic dull or did not like the time spent on it. Others, though, registered their interest in the topic, some requesting extra exercises or more attention to specific issues. Part of this negativity may lie in a reluctance by students to recognise the importance of precision in grammar, spelling and punctuation in their writing, but could also be a side-effect of the perception that they "just could not get it", a phrase often used by students confronting a particularly difficult concept. This was most clearly seen when students were required to edit each other's work in class in a process of peer review after each written assessment. Students were at first very unsure of their own ability to judge and comment on another person's work (as suggested by the title of this paper, which comes from a student comment written on an assessment during editing). This lack of confidence abated slowly as they edited more work and by the end of semester, students appeared much more certain about what was 'right' and 'wrong' and showed an increased willingness to correct mistakes.

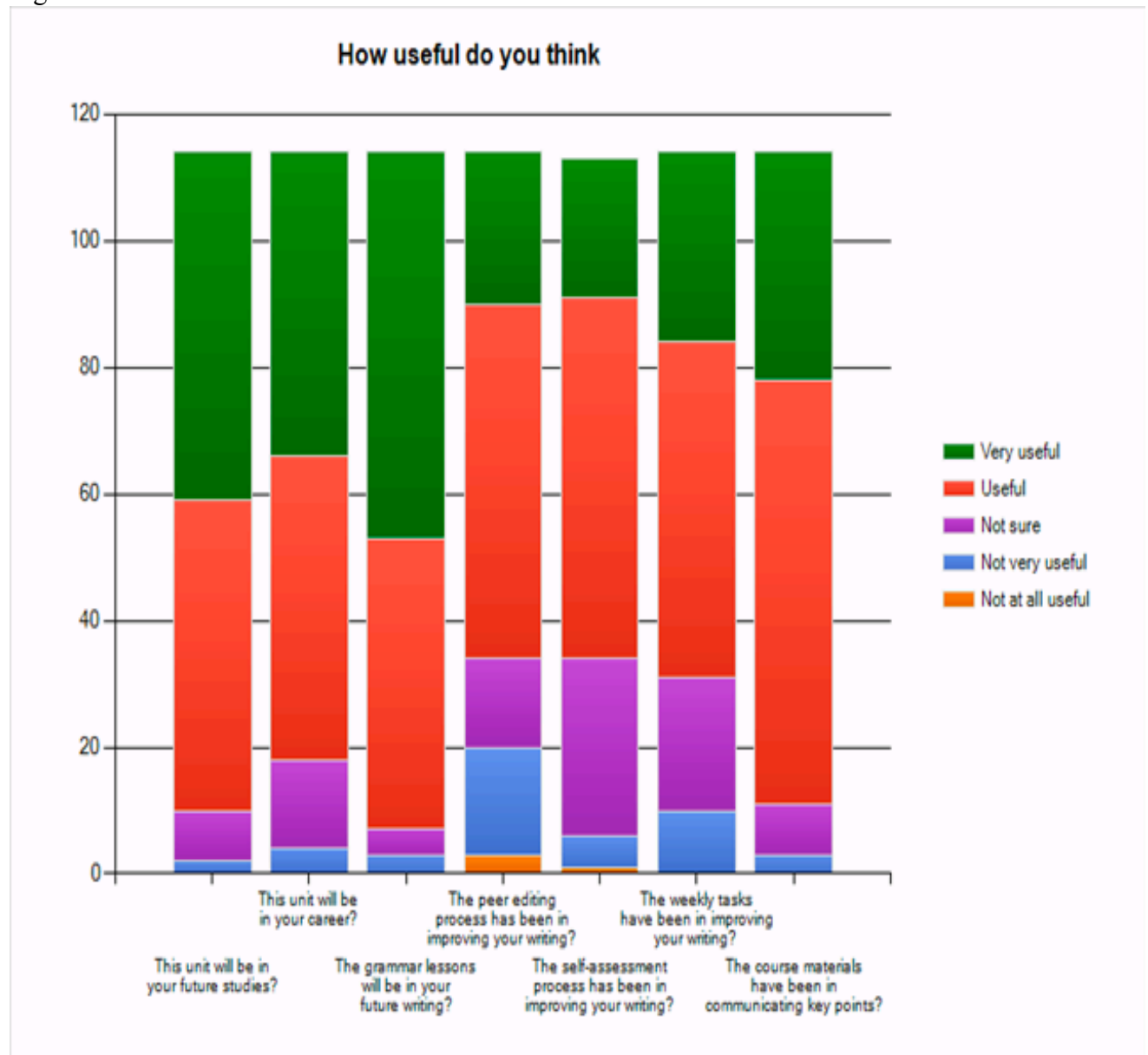
Student evaluation

In week 10, students were asked to complete an anonymous survey about various aspects of the unit, indicating the level of usefulness of different components as well

as how they viewed the changed structure. Some 114 students completed the survey. Given the high level of negativity seen in the week four evaluations (just six weeks prior), it was expected this would be carried through into the more formal evaluation; it was not the case.

Students at the week 10 stage showed a much greater appreciation for the grammar workshops and the editing exercises, saying they found them highly useful. As shown in figure one, students were asked to indicate how useful these aspects would be in their future studies and future career, ranking them as ‘not at all useful’, ‘not very useful’, ‘not sure’, ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’. Some 94 per cent of students rated grammar lessons as useful or very useful for their future writing, while 91 per cent rated the unit as useful or very useful for their future studies. Some 84 per cent said the unit would be very useful or useful in their career. These findings are coupled with the response from 70 per cent of students who said they found the workshop format better than separate lectures and tutorials.

Figure one:



Comments from the students in this anonymous survey also support the measures. Said one: “I think the content of this unit works well in a seminar format, making the class very interactive. Teaching grammar with the journalism unit has been inspired, and works brilliantly.” Another responded: “It is an extremely well structured unit that covers a lot of ground and will be very useful for any writing career in general.”

Discussion and recommendations

While the changes to this unit were driven in part by the results of the employer perception study, they fit closely with the university’s suggested inclusion of writing diagnostic exercises for first-year students to identify and address writing problems early on. The ECU University Curriculum Framework Implementation Plan includes as a key priority “English language skills development” and phase two of that strategy (currently at draft stage) discusses the embedding of skills, such as English language skills, in courses, with the goal of improving employability (*ECU 2012 Undergraduate Curriculum Framework Draft 2010*). The advantage of the model we used was that lessons were pseudo-compulsory, in as much as they were offered during normal class time and students were expected (though not officially required) to attend the workshops. This is preferable to a voluntary system, as many students self-identified as not needing help (as shown by early student feedback responses) only to discover that they benefited greatly from the grammar workshops. Our first recommendation, then, is that students not be given the choice of attendance, but that they have the lessons incorporated in other learning that they would normally be expected to attend. Reducing the pool of students to those who think they have a problem with writing or grammar eliminates many who *do* need assistance but do not believe they would benefit from extra help.

We also found that embedding the learning advisor in the unit — so she had weekly contact with students — normalised the addition of grammar lessons into the curriculum, so that students didn’t feel it was an ‘extra’, but part of the course. It also built positive relationships with students so they felt more inclined to make one-on-one appointments with the advisor to address particular issues. It is for this reason that our second recommendation is to embed the learning advisor in the course, rather than run anything additional in a unit or offer it as ‘extra lessons’. This does raise the issue of displacing other information from the curriculum, but as these areas are so vital to student employability, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation should be considered core learning areas to achieve graduates who are expert in communications.

A third recommendation is to link the grammar work frequently back to the context, in this case, how it relates to employment in either journalism or a related communications industry. We found that this increased the willingness of students to engage in the workshops and they were quick to point out problems they saw in real examples of writing. Similarly, we would recommend that educators anticipate initial reluctance on the part of students — particularly, we found, domestic students — to engage in grammar lessons without a clear rationale as to why they should and why it would be useful for them in the future. Mustering your arguments about the usefulness of grammar may be difficult when faced with students who write frequently without the restrictions of spelling, grammar or punctuation rules, but we

found showing them actual examples of poorly written student or industry work to be convincing.

Finally, we would recommend an increased focus on including spelling, grammar, punctuation and sentence structure in the marking criteria for student assessments, so they are not considered additional, secondary to content. Focusing on content to the exclusion of technical competence is unlikely to improve student writing ability, but focusing on technical competence should not diminish the quality of content.

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